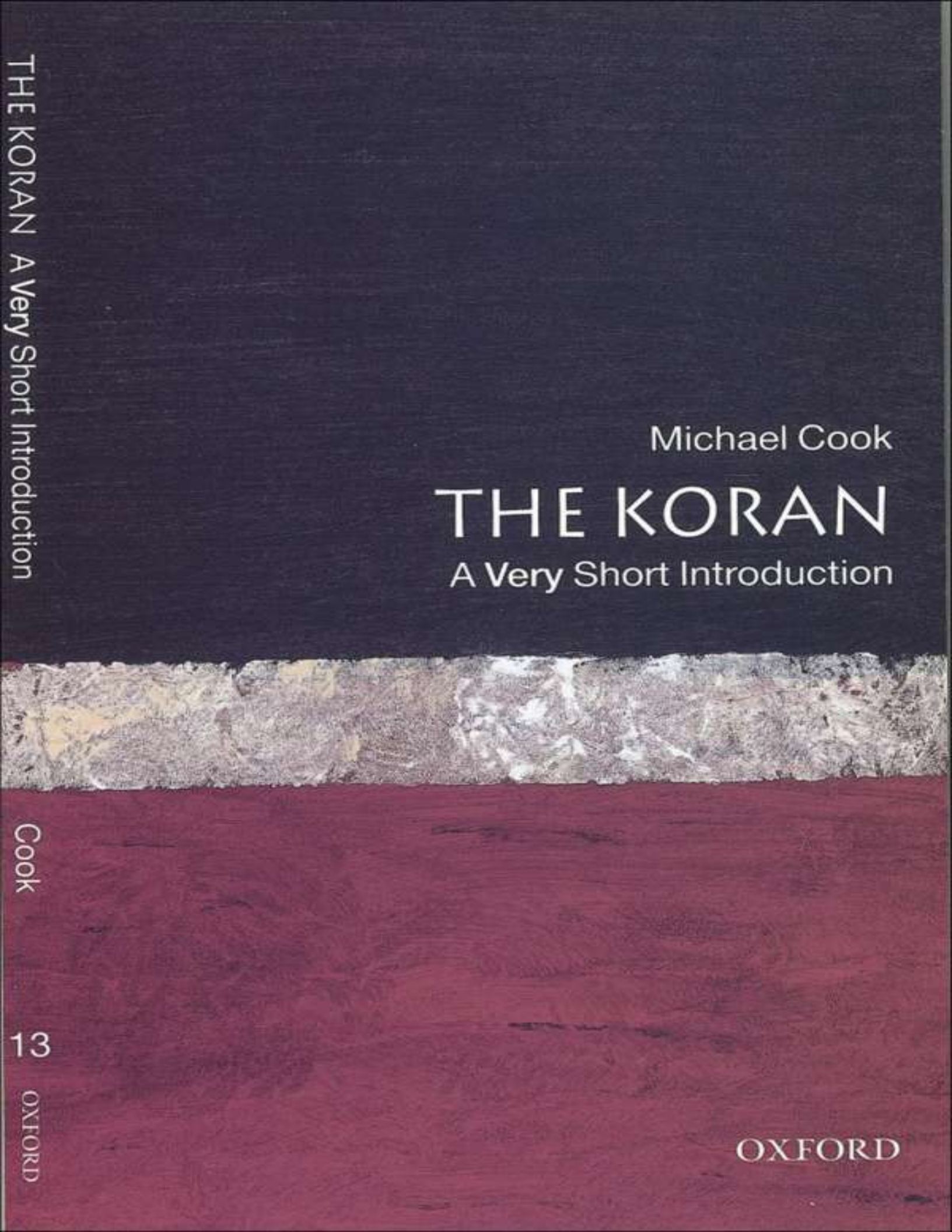
THE KORAN A Very Short Introduction
Cook
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A Very Short Introduction

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The Koran: A Very Short Introduction

Preface

George Sale, who published the first good English translation of the Koran in 1734, hastened to assure his readers that no good Christian 'can apprehend any danger from so manifest a forgery'. Taking a swipe at 'the Romish communion', he went on to observe that 'the Protestants alone are able to attack the Korân with success; and for them, I trust, Providence has reserved the glory of its overthrow'. Providence, of course, has done nothing of the kind. Sale's remarks nevertheless served their purpose. Having established his credentials as a Christian, and, perhaps more important, a Christian of the right kind, he felt free to renounce 'opprobrious appellations, and unmannerly expressions' in speaking of Muḥammad and his Koran. When he came to discuss the character of the book, he described its style as 'generally beautiful and fluent', and 'in many places, especially where the majesty and attributes of God are described, sublime and magnificent'. An example he singled out in his translation is the 'throne verse' (Q2:255); he hastened to add that 'it must not be supposed the translation comes up to the dignity of the original', a problem we still share with him.

Fortunately it is no longer necessary for a Western author to open a book on the Koran in the way in which Sale did. In Britain today,

even the adherents of the Romish communion have been emancipated. My own starting point is perhaps closer in spirit to the idiom of Sale's contemporary Edward Gibbon, who in his chapter on the career of the Prophet wrote as follows: 'It is not the propagation but the permanency of his religion that deserves our wonder: the same pure and perfect impression which he engraved at Mecca and Medina, is preserved, after the revolutions of twelve centuries, by the Indian, the African, and the Turkish proselytes of the Koran.' I am not sure that I believe everything that Gibbon says here, but as his wording aptly suggests, the Koran has constituted a remarkably strong core of identity and continuity for a religious tradition that is now in its fifteenth century. That role of the Koran in the religious history of the Islamic world is what this book is about.

I should perhaps say a word about the way I have organized the book. After a couple of introductory chapters (Part One), I have chosen to write history backwards. Thus I deal first with the modern period (Part Two), then with the traditional Muslim world (Part Three), and finally with the formation of the Koran (Part Four). The reason for this choice is straightforward: for any but a specialist, the phenomena of our own times are easier to grasp than those of the past.

I have stuck to the old Anglicized form 'Koran' because it can readily be pronounced by anyone used to English orthography; this is not the case with the eminently correct transcription *'Qur'ān*',

which is now in wide use in English (though not, for example, in German or French). The stress is on the second syllable.

Acknowledgements

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One of my greatest debts is to those who helped me to obtain and understand the manuscript material in Spanish, Polish, and Afrikaans which appears in Figs. 18–20. For the Spanish text, I am indebted to Consuelo Lopez-Morillas for much assistance and guidance, and to Maribel Fierro for, among other things, helping to obtain the reproduction. For the Polish text, I would not have been able to obtain the reproduction without the sustained support of Oleg Grabar, or to read the text with any assurance without the advice of Peter Golden; and I am indebted to Kathleen Knight-O'Neill for technical assistance. I owe the Afrikaans text to Shamil

Jeppie, who also transcribed and translated it for me; Beatrice Gruendler and Gary van Wyk kindly helped me with queries.

Several of those who helped me probably did not know that I was writing this book, and none of them are in any way responsible for its contents.

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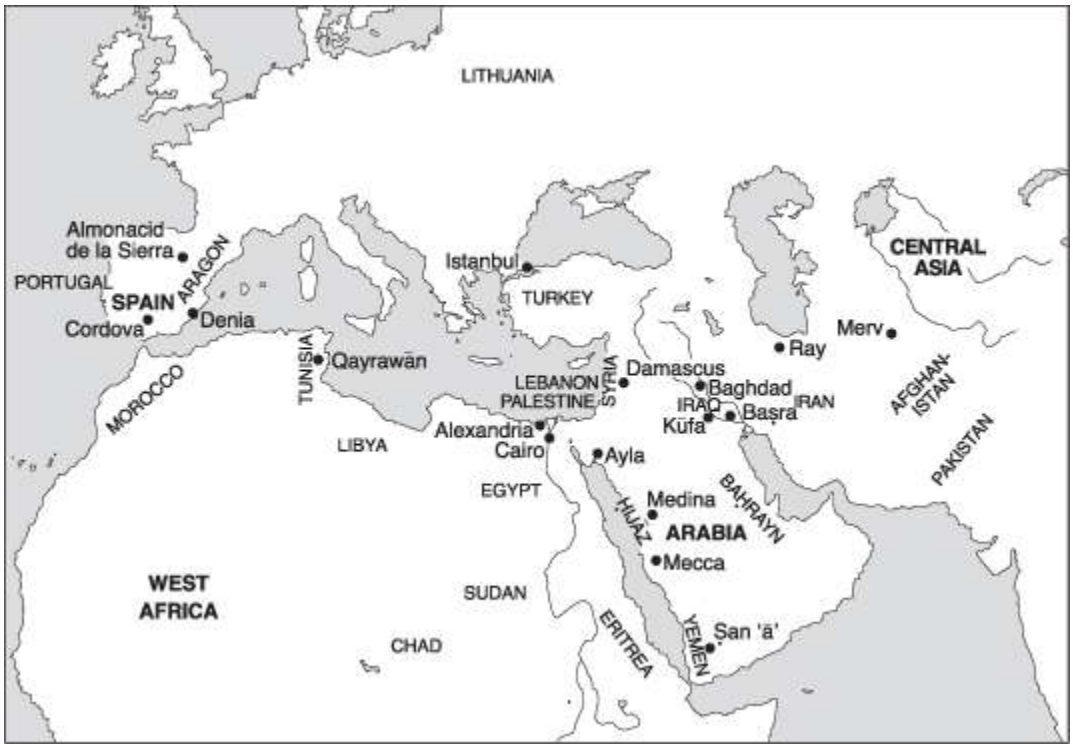
Princeton University Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Manuscripts Division, Islamic Third Series, no. 295



The purpose of this map is to locate places mentioned in the text. It thus contains information relating to a variety of periods.

Part One
Introduction

Chapter 1
Preliminaries

The idea of scripture

Language exists for people to talk to one another. Typically, it is used on the spur of the moment, and the words rapidly dissipate. Many of us forget most of what we say and hear, or at best remember only the gist of it. But given the will to do so, it is possible to create and preserve a linguistic artefact with an existence that goes beyond what one person happened to say to another on a particular occasion. Any nursery rhyme will do as an example. If someone tells us that Jack and Jill went *down* the hill, we can immediately object that this is not how it goes. The fact that the objection can be made shows that we have to do with a *text*.

In a rather trivial sense, any text claims some kind of authority: these, not those, are the words of the nursery rhyme. But in practice, the words of a nursery rhyme are unlikely to carry the same authority as, say, those of the Constitution of the United States of America. Particularly in ages in which preserving texts was less easy than it is today, societies could be expected to put their best efforts into preserving those they regarded as most authoritative.

One way a text can carry such superior authority is by being sacred, but, of course, it is not the only one.

How a society goes about the business of preserving an authoritative text can vary. It may, or may not, feel committed to reproducing such a text with exactly the same wording each time. It may preserve the text in a purely oral form, resorting to mnemonic techniques of varying degrees of sophistication to check the natural decay of human memory. Or it may use some form of writing. In general, it makes sense to suppose that a society in possession of writing will be more likely to preserve exact wording. But this is not a foregone conclusion: oral transmission can achieve remarkable fidelity, and written transmission can be very lax indeed.

The foregoing remarks hardly rise above the level of common sense, but they serve to frame a rather striking historical fact. Each of the major Eurasian traditions which dominate the history of literate culture has possessed some body of authoritative texts, the transmission of which has been central to its continuing identity. The Greeks had their Homer, the Jews and Christians their Bible, the Zoroastrians their Avesta, the Hindus their Vedas, the Buddhists their Tripiṭ aka, the Chinese their classics, and the Muslims their Koran. In terms of character and content, these texts do not have much in common. Who, on that basis alone, would think of placing the *Iliad*, the Koran, and the hexagrams of the *I ching* on the same shelf? Nor is there anything very uniform about the way in which such texts have been preserved, bar the fact that sooner or later they

were all reduced to writing. What they share, despite all this variety, is their centrality to their respective cultures.

There is no single word in English that picks out this set of canonical texts and separates them from the general run of nursery rhymes, constitutions, novels, and so forth. Some of them are habitually referred to as ‘classics’. As our term for the literary masterpieces of ancient Greece and Rome, this fits the Homeric epics perfectly, and by analogy we have come to speak of ‘the Chinese classics’. We do not, however, feel comfortable applying the term to texts vested with a strongly religious authority. Here the word most often used is ‘scripture’: the Bible is the paradigm case, and by extension we tend to speak of the Zoroastrian, Hindu, and Buddhist ‘scriptures’. But the usage jars, since in their own cultures the Avesta, Vedas, and Tripiṭ aka are conceived as oral, not written, texts. Fortunately this dilemma does not arise with the Koran, which is as much a written text as the Bible.

That the Koran has something in common with the Bible should not be surprising. Though the two texts are separated by more or less a millennium, they come from the same part of the world, and from the same broad monotheist tradition within it. Yet the wider field of Eurasian ‘scriptures’ and ‘classics’ is not to be forgotten. It will yield us some useful comparisons in the course of this book, helping us to understand both the nature of the Koran and the part it has played in the culture to which it belongs.

A preliminary sketch of the history of the Koran

The Koran is the Muslim scripture, that is to say the scripture of the followers of Islam. Islam is the religion established among the Arabs – a people until then largely confined to the Arabian peninsula – by the Prophet Muḥammad in the early seventh century. According to Muslim tradition, the Koran was revealed to Muḥammad by God through the agency of the angel Gabriel; this took place partly in Mecca, his home-town, and partly in Medina, where he succeeded in creating a state in an otherwise stateless tribal society. The message was revealed in Arabic, the language of the people it was addressed to; for some further information about the language, see the 'Note on Arabic' near the end of the book.

Although the revelation was complete before the death of Muḥammad in 632, the tradition tells us that he did not himself assemble the material into a definitive text. The task of making a book of his revelations – the 'collection' of the Koran – was thus left to his successors, the Caliphs, who ruled the Muslim community from Medina in the decades after his death. Muslim tradition would place the completion of this task somewhere around 650.

The contents and literary character of the Koran defy brief categorization. The book is divided into 114 Sūras, or chapters, but usually only very short Sūras possess an evident thematic unity. The Koran takes up many stories from the Biblical heritage, especially that of Moses; but it does not offer a

sustained narrative of the kind found in the Book of Exodus. It has much to say about the moral and legal duties of believers, but contains nothing like the law-code which is the centrepiece of the Book of Deuteronomy. Many Koranic passages could aptly be described as preaching; but where the voice of the preacher in the Gospels is that of Jesus during his ministry on earth, in the Koran it is rather that of the ever-living God.

In the meantime, the same Caliphs had unleashed the Arab conquests, creating an empire which by the early eighth century stretched from what is now Portugal to what is now Pakistan. This empire was strongly identified with Islam, and within it there took shape the culture we know as Islamic civilization. The most sacred text of the religion, and the most authoritative text of the culture, was the Koran. The status of the book was a dramatic illustration of the fact that the language of the tribesmen of Arabia had become that of a major Eurasian civilization.

The establishment of the Islamic empire was of great significance for the spread of Islam. In most of its territory the great majority of the population converted to the new religion, and in much of it (though not in Iran) it also adopted Arabic as its spoken language. At a later stage Islam went on to spread far beyond the initial area of conquest, sometimes through further conquest, sometimes through peaceful contacts. In such ways Islam became the predominant religion of many other parts of the Old World; these include what is

now Turkey, together with substantial parts of Africa and of Central, South, and Southeast Asia.

Today there are also significant Muslim populations of diverse ethnic origins in all major Western countries, including Britain and the United States. As we enter the twenty-first century, the total number of Muslims in the world is somewhat over a billion, making up almost a fifth of the world's population. For all Muslim communities, whatever their language and wherever they live, the Koran is their scripture.

Chapter 2
The message of the Koran

The Fātiḥa

An obvious way to get an idea of what a book is like is to look at how it begins. The Koran opens like this:

> In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.
> Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being, the All-merciful, the All-compassionate, the Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour. Guide us in the Straight Path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those against whom Thou are wrathful, nor of those who are astray. (Q1:1–7)

This passage makes up the first Sūra, or chapter, of the Koran; it is commonly known as the Fātiḥa, or ‘opening’. Like any short introduction, it does not have time to say very much, but what it does say is enough to adumbrate the major ideas to follow. Significantly, it speaks only of a single god, but of two kinds of people; and it reveals several things about these parties and the asymmetric relations between them.

The Fātiḥa begins with God (Allāh), and He retains a dominant role throughout the passage. Since He is 'the Lord of all Being' (literally 'the Master of the worlds'), He is obviously a god on a cosmic scale. It might be thought that such a god would be too elevated to concern Himself with mere humans, but in fact this expectation would be quite wrong. God relates very strongly to mankind, albeit in two distinctly antithetical ways. Twice He is described as being merciful and compassionate, and it fits with this that He is someone to whom people look for help and guidance. But He is also, it seems, given to anger. (Strictly speaking, the passage speaks only of 'those against whom wrath is directed', without mentioning that it is God who is angry; but nobody has ever been in much doubt that the anger in question is His.)

'The Straight Path': *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*. The word *ṣirāṭ* is interesting. The Romans used the Latin 'strata' for the kind of paved road they built so straight. From them the word passed to the peoples of their empire and even beyond, so that from 'strata' derive both the Arabic *ṣirāṭ* and the English 'street'. But whereas 'street' has remained a secular term, *ṣirāṭ* came to be used only in religious contexts. It is a curious feature of the word that it has no plural in Arabic, reinforcing our sense of the uniqueness of the Straight Path.

Turning to the two kinds of people who appear in the Fātiḥa, the first to be mentioned are those whom God has blessed; they are the

ones on the Straight Path, and it is doubtless they who can expect to receive help. The second kind are those with whom God is angry and who are astray. We have the sense that the two groups are sharply separated. There is a single path to be on which is to be blessed by God; the rest by implication is a wilderness, and to be lost in it is tantamount to being the object of His wrath. More ominous still, there is mention of a 'Day of Judgment' of which God is the 'Master' – a day on which God will doubtless vindicate some people, but condemn others to an awful fate.

The people who speak the words of the Fātiḥa are essentially proposing a deal. They affirm that praise is due to God, and assure Him that it is He whom they serve, and He to whom they pray. In other words, they worship Him – and, they give Him to understand, Him alone. (The exclusiveness of their profession of devotion is not so explicit in the original Arabic as it is in the translation, but it is there.) In return for such behaviour they clearly hope for a benevolent response, one that will bring them guidance and help, and place them among those whom God has blessed. But, however strong their hope, they do not seem to think this election a foregone conclusion.

Thus, even if the Fātiḥa were all that we possessed of the Koran, we would still have some notion of what the book was about. But we would only be able to speculate as to how the various facets of God's personality come together, and we would have no concrete sense of how the people on the Straight Path differ from the ones in

the wilderness. Fortunately we can now set about leafing through the rest of the book. A good way to start is by looking at what the Koran has to say about the people who find themselves on the right side of God.

The friends of God

God has friends and enemies. Here is a passage about His friends:

> Surely God's friends – no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow. Those who believe, and are godfearing – for them is good tidings in the present life and in the world to come. (Q10:62–4)

As might be expected, the standing of such people has much to do with their conduct. The Koran repeatedly promises Paradise to those who perform good deeds, using terms such as these:

> Give thou good tidings to those who believe and do deeds of righteousness, that for them await gardens underneath which rivers flow; . . . and there for them shall be spouses purified; therein they shall dwell forever. (Q2:25)

But in both these verses, something else appears in the characterization of those who are on the right side of God: they are believers (singular *mu'min*) – in contradistinction to the unbelievers

(singular *kāfir*). This verse gives some idea of what their beliefs and good deeds consist in:

> True piety is this: to believe in God, and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets, to give of one's substance, however cherished, to kinsmen, and orphans, the needy, the traveller, beggars, and to ransom the slave, to perform the prayer, to pay the alms. (Q2:177)

Something that is not brought out in this verse is that those who believe in God must be scrupulous in not associating others with Him:

> He is the Living One; there is no god but He. So call upon Him, making your religion His entirely. Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being. Say: 'I am forbidden to serve those you call on apart from God since the clear signs came to me from my Lord; and I am commanded to surrender to the Lord of all Being.' (Q40:65–6)

We will learn more of the sin of calling upon others apart from God when we turn to His enemies. Before we do so, it is worth underlining the notion which appears in this verse of surrendering oneself to God, or giving oneself entirely to Him (*islām*); it is this idea that gives us the word 'Islam'.

The enemies of God

The enemies of God are the other side of the coin. Their fate is as dire as that of God's friends is enviable. Here is a passage about the fate in store for them at the final judgement:

> Upon the day when God's enemies are mustered to the Fire, duly disposed, till when they are come into it, their hearing, their eyes and their skins bear witness against them concerning what they have been doing, and they will say to their skins, 'Why bore you witness against us?' (Q41:19–21)

(The reader should not puzzle over the syntax of this passage – the meaning is clear enough.) The fate of God's enemies is linked here to 'what they have been doing' – though we are not told just what this was. Such silence is not uncommon in the Koran. Here, for example, is all that it has to tell us about a certain Abū Lahab ('father of flame') and his wife:

> Perish the hands of Abū Lahab, and perish he! His wealth avails him not, neither what he has earned; he shall roast at a flaming fire and his wife, the carrier of firewood, upon her neck a rope of palm-fibre. (Q111)

Again this provides a graphic account of the punishment, but it tells us nothing about the crime.

In other cases, however, the misdeeds which arouse God's anger are duly specified, and they can be very varied. Some Israelite fishermen were punished in an exotic manner for desecrating the Sabbath – something which would not, of course, be a sin for Muslims (Q7:163–6). Thamūd, a people of pre-Islamic Arabia, incurred divine vengeance for slaughtering a she-camel which Ṣāliḥ, a messenger sent to them by God, had declared to be a sign from Him (Q7:73–8). But there is one form of wrongdoing that matters more than any other for the message of the Koran, and this is failure to worship God alone (*shirk*, conventionally translated 'polytheism').

This failure may be a matter of the rankest idolatry. One verse recounts the origins of the incident of calf-worship which took place among the Israelites following their exodus from Egypt:

> And We brought the Children of Israel over the sea, and they came upon a people cleaving to idols they had. They said, 'Moses, make for us a god, as they have gods.' (Q7:138)

To this Moses replied:

> 'What, shall I seek a god for you other than God, who has preferred you above all beings?' (Q7:140)

But the offence can be subtler than this, as in a verse which turns on the fact that it is more dangerous to be at sea than on dry land:

> When they embark in the ships, they call on God, making their religion entirely His; but when He has delivered them to the land, they associate others with Him. (Q29:65)

Neither at sea nor on land do these wrongdoers go so far as to *deny* God; it suffices to damn them that, in one of these contexts, they associate others with Him. Such people may even claim that these others are no more than intercessors mediating their relationship with God:

> They serve, apart from God, what hurts them not neither profits them, and they say, 'These are our intercessors with God.' (Q10:18)

But even this will not help them, for they have still failed to make their religion entirely God's.

All who behave in such ways are objects of divine anger. When the Israelites fall into idolatry, Moses says:

> 'Surely those who took to themselves the Calf – anger shall overtake them from their Lord.' (Q7:152)

Likewise hypocrites and those who fail to worship God alone face a fearsome prospect:

> God is wroth with them, and has cursed them, and has prepared for them Gehenna – an evil homecoming! (Q48:6)

We can also equate God's enemies with 'those who are astray' and 'the unbelievers'. The enmity is mutual:

> Whosoever is an enemy to God and His angels and His Messengers, and Gabriel, and Michael – surely God is an enemy to the unbelievers. (Q2:98)

(Michael, like Gabriel, is an angel.) All this might make it sound as if there is no way out for anyone who has fallen foul of God. But fortunately it is not quite like that.

Guidance

As we have seen, God's friends and enemies are polar opposites, in this world and the next. But it can hardly be the case that the membership of the two groups is permanently frozen; were that so, there would be no point in beseeching God to 'guide us in the Straight Path'. Presumably it is possible for some at least of 'those who are astray' to find their way onto the 'Straight Path'. What can make it possible for them to do this, the Fātiḥa suggests, is God's guidance (*hudā*).

The Fātiḥa gives no indication how God provides this guidance. We might be tempted to imagine it as a silent, invisible spiritual force that imperceptibly seeps into people's hearts. In fact, it is

characteristically a very public kind of guidance. As we have seen in some of the verses already quoted, God has His messengers and prophets; they include such well-known figures from the Judeo-Christian tradition as Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, together with some Arabian messengers such as Ṣāliḥ. Their primary role is to act as the bearers of God's guidance, as in the following verse (which we can take to refer to Muḥammad himself):

> It is He who has sent His Messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may uplift it above every religion, though the unbelievers be averse'. (Q9:33)

Often the guidance brought by the messenger consists only of an oral message, as in the case of Ṣāliḥ's mission to Thamūd. But in some cases – the ones that matter most – the messenger brings guidance in the form of a scripture. This passage can be understood to refer to the Koran:

> That is the Book, wherein is no doubt, a guidance to the godfearing . . . who believe in what has been sent down to thee, and what has been sent down before thee . . . those are upon guidance from their Lord, those are the ones who prosper. (Q2:2, 4, 5)

Such divine guidance can rescue those who were astray:

> Truly God was gracious to the believers when He raised up among them a Messenger from themselves, to recite to them His signs and to purify them, and to teach them the Book and the Wisdom, though before they were in manifest error. (Q3:164)

Previously Muḥammad's future followers were out in the wilderness; now, thanks to God's guidance, they are on the Straight Path.

But it takes more than the arrival of divine guidance to bring about this happy outcome. Those whom the guidance reaches must repent of their wicked ways. The theme of repentance is consequently a prominent one in the Koran, often associated with God's compassion – 'My mercy embraces all things' (Q7:156). Thus, after harshly condemning the worshippers of the calf, Moses adds the kindly thought:

> 'And those who do evil deeds, then repent thereafter and believe, surely thereafter thy Lord is All-forgiving, All-compassionate.' (Q7:153)

Thus God responds to repentance with forgiveness – and, eventually, Paradise. Again with reference to the Israelites, we read:

> Then there succeeded after them a succession who wasted the prayer, and followed lusts; so they shall encounter error save him who repents, and believes, and does a

> righteous deed; those – they shall enter Paradise.' (Q19:59–60)

These verses tend to suggest that once God has sent His guidance, it is up to humans whether they respond positively or negatively. Here indeed is a much more explicit statement to this effect:

> Say: 'The truth is from your Lord; so let whosoever will believe, and let whosoever will disbelieve.' (Q18:29)

But other verses indicate that the choice is God's, for example:

> As for the unbelievers, alike it is to them whether thou hast warned them or hast not warned them, they do not believe. God has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and on their eyes a covering, and there awaits them a mighty chastisement. (Q2:6–7)

Here compassion is conspicuously absent, and we might even speak of divine misguidance. There are in fact frequent references in the Koran to God leading people astray:

> If God had willed, He would have made you one community; but He leads astray whom He will, and guides whom He will; and you will surely be questioned about the things you wrought. (Q16:93)

How, one might ask, are God's enemies to be held responsible for the things they wrought when it was God who chose to mislead them? This is not a question to which the Koran provides an answer; it is, after all, a scripture, not a treatise on dogmatic theology.

God

Humans, as we have seen, are by no means all the same. They can be either God's friends or His enemies, and they can make the transition from the one to the other. Nor is this all. The hypocrites, whom we met in passing, have a foot in both camps, and there are further subtleties which we can leave aside. All this has the effect of easing the strain on the Koranic categories that describe humans. God is a different matter. That there is only one of Him is not just a first approximation, it is also the last word on the subject, and it makes the concept of Godhead a notably tense one. This is why I have left God till last, for all that the Fātiḥa begins with Him.

One crucial feature of God is His cosmic role, to which the Fātiḥa refers by giving Him the title 'the Lord of all Being'. The word translated 'Lord' entails not just absolute authority, but also absolute ownership. The 'throne verse' expands on the idea like this:

> God, there is no god but He, the Living, the Everlasting. Slumber seizes Him not, neither sleep; to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. . . . His Throne comprises the heavens and earth; the preserving of them

> oppresses Him not; He is the All-high, the All-glorious. (Q2:255)

The reason why God owns the world in this way is straightforward: He made it. For example, He says:

> We created the heavens and the earth, and what is between them, in six days, and no weariness touched us. (Q50:38)

And again:

> And heaven – We built it with might, and We extend it wide. And the earth – We spread it forth. (Q51:47–8)

God is thus responsible for bringing into being the large-scale structure of the universe. But He is also involved in the details, as a reference to zoology in the next verse makes clear: ‘And of everything We created two kinds’ (Q51:49). More specifically, He created humans:

> We created man of an extraction of clay, then We set him, a drop, in a receptacle secure, then We created of the drop a clot, then We created of the clot a tissue, then We created of the tissue bones, then We garmented the bones in flesh. . . . So blessed be God, the fairest of creators! (Q23:12–14)

Clay is thus the raw material from which humans were made, just as the genies (*jinn*) were created from fire (Q15:27). But this account is not for information only. The point is that what God has done once, He can and will do again:

> Then after that you shall surely die, then on the Day of Resurrection you shall surely be raised up. (Q23:15–16)

This brings us back to the highly articulate skins of God's enemies. Here is what these skins had to say in response to the question posed to them by those inside them:

> 'God gave us speech, as He gave everything speech. He created you the first time, and unto Him you shall be returned. Not so did you cover yourselves, that your hearing, your eyes and your skins should not bear witness against you; but you thought that God would never know much of the things that you were working. That then, the thought you thought about your Lord, has destroyed you, and therefore you find yourselves this morning among the losers.' (Q41:21–3)

As this suggests, God is aware of everything that happens in His universe down to the last detail:

> He knows what is in land and sea; not a leaf falls, but He knows it. (Q6:59)

Thus the grandeur of God's cosmic role in no way distances Him from the pettiest of human, or other, affairs. The resulting intimacy is vividly summed up in this verse:

> We indeed created man; and We know what his soul whispers within him, and We are nearer to Him than the jugular vein. (Q50:16)

Nothing is beneath His notice.

What is striking about the role of God in mundane affairs is not just its pervasiveness, but also its ambivalence. As we have seen, God can be merciful and compassionate, responsive to those who turn to Him in repentance, generously providing guidance and help to his worshippers, not to mention rewards in this world and the next. But He can also be vengeful and hostile, not just punishing those who fail to respond to His guidance, but actively leading them astray, and thereafter consigning them to hellfire. If we ask how this can be so, the general answer is again that the Koran is not a theological disquisition. But there is one illuminating point that comes out of the Koran itself, and it takes us back to God's role as creator. God's sovereignty over His universe is absolute:

> Blessed be He . . . to whom belongs the Kingdom of the heavens and the earth; and He has not taken to Him a son, and He has no associate in the Kingdom; and He created every thing, then He ordained it very exactly. (Q25:1–2)

If, as we should, we take quite literally the statement that God created *everything*, this has a startling implication which is made more or less explicit in the last Sūra but one of the Koran:

> Say: 'I take refuge with the Lord of the Daybreak from the evil of what He has created, from the evil of darkness when it gathers, from the evil of the women who blow on knots, from the evil of an envier when he envies.' (Q113)

(The women who blow on knots are witches.) This is as close as the Koran comes to saying that God created what is evil just as He created what is good.

So what, we might ask, is God really like? The question could be said to be unanswerable; there *is* nothing like Him (Q42:11). But one verse describes Him as Light, and goes on to tell us what His Light is like:

> God is the Light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp (the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star) kindled from a Blessed Tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; Light upon Light. (Q24:35).

From this lyrical climax, much loved by the Islamic mystics, the verse then descends to a more familiar level. It tells us that God

guides whom He will to His light, and it ends by affirming that He knows everything.

There is, of course, far more in the Koran than is conveyed by this bare outline of its message. Nothing said above will quite prepare the reader for the tone of a passage like this:

> The Clatterer! What is the Clatterer? And what shall teach thee what is the Clatterer? (Q101:1–3)

The passage that follows makes it clear that the context is eschatological, but leaves us guessing just what the Clatterer might be. Many more verses will be introduced in the course of the following chapters. But in the end, the only way to find out what is in the book is to read it for oneself.

Part Two
The Koran in the modern world

Chapter 3
The dissemination of the Koran

Modernity, in the experience of most of us, is a mixed blessing, and what is true for us is also true for scripture. We may begin with the ways in which modernity has been good to scripture, in the Islamic world as elsewhere.

Modern conditions make it possible to disseminate a scripture among those who believe in it as never before. This communications revolution may not mean much to the Brahmins, who have always made it their business to withhold the Vedas from a significant part of non-Brahmin society. Nor has it been quite so revolutionary for the Chinese, among whom as early as 745 the Emperor required that every household possess a copy of his commentary on a simple Confucian classic. But among monotheists, this aspect of modernity has been a very positive development.

There are several aspects to the change, the most obvious being the rise of printing. In the pre-modern Islamic world, each copy of the Koran – a text of some seventy-seven thousand words – had to be written by hand, a task that took a competent scribe many days of work. We hear of one medieval copyist who completed a Koran in

six days; when he foolishly boasted that ‘no weariness touched us’ (Q50:38), his hand is said to have withered. Another, more prudent copyist used to take four months. Printing can change this dramatically: as a seventeenth-century Turkish historian put it, ‘the labour it takes to produce a thousand volumes is less than what is required for one manuscript volume’. The technology is, of course, significantly older than modernity. The Chinese practised it over a thousand years ago, and Europe followed suit over half a millennium later; by 1500, the Bible had been printed at least 120 times. But the Islamic world was much slower to embrace the new technology. Despite some abortive medieval precedents, it was only in the eighteenth century that printing was adopted in Istanbul, and only in the nineteenth century that it began to be used to reproduce the Koran in any country under Muslim rule, first in Iran and later in the Ottoman Empire. In the twentieth century, however, the book began to be printed on a very large scale. The standard modern edition is that produced in Egypt, under official aegis, in 1924; it has frequently been reissued, and must rank among the major publishing successes of the century. The number of copies of the Koran that have been printed must by now be enormous, very likely greater than the total number of manuscript copies ever made. Indeed, today electronically sophisticated believers are independent even of printing: the text of the Koran can be read on the Internet.

Modern technology has brought about a similar quantum leap in the availability of the Koran as an oral text. Under pre-modern

conditions, believers could hear the Koran only when and where someone was reciting it – a performance which takes a good many hours to complete. Over the last century a whole range of technologies (gramophones, radios, tape-recorders, videos, television) have made it possible for a given act of recitation to be heard at other places and other times (and no doubt there is nothing to prevent the electronic synthesis of Koranic recitation without any antecedent human performance at all). Here again, the number of times the Koran has been heard through such technologies is very likely greater than the number of times it was recited in the whole of previous Islamic history.

Alongside the developments which have rendered the Koran physically more accessible to believers, other changes have helped to make believers better prepared to receive the message. In terms of basic literacy, there is little doubt that the Islamic world today is better educated than at any time in the past. It is true that some Muslim countries have literacy rates as low as any in the world; but it is no longer unusual for half the population to possess some degree of literacy. And to the extent that the Koran remains part of the syllabus of primary education in Muslim countries (see Fig. 1), believers are helped not just by greater literacy, but by wider exposure to the text.

1. A Koran class in Khartoum, Sudan. The setting is modern: the girl is sitting on a chair, the Koran rests on the desk in front of her. She is reading the opening verses of Sūra 68, in which God reassures the Prophet that he is not possessed by a genie. She has her finger on the first word of verse 5: *fa-sa-tubṣiru*, 'So thou shalt see'. What Muḥammad will see is whether it is he or his pagan opponents who are demented.

These quantitative changes have also had some subtler qualitative effects. In a manner very characteristic of what modernity does to tradition where it does not simply undermine it, the effect of modern conditions has been to make the Koranic text and its recitation more uniform than ever before, at the expense of local variation. This variation, as we shall see, was never very great in the traditional Islamic world, and even now it has not entirely disappeared; but the trend is unmistakable. In Morocco, for example, the traditional North African textual tradition is still preserved in the mosques, but an intrusive Middle Eastern style has invaded the marketplace. This trend is partly a matter of numbers: a small set of printing presses has displaced a large number of

copyists, just as the availability of first-rate recitations on tape must have curtailed the market for live performances by humble local reciters. Partly also it is a matter of trend setting: the cultural prestige of Egypt in the modern Islamic world has given that country a disproportionate say in what the Koran should look like and sound like. Either way, the effect is homogenization.

Homogenization, however, courts the revenge effect of fragmentation. In the event there has been very little of this, but it is nevertheless worth identifying the key fault-line. This fault-line is not sectarian: the Shī'ites, the Muslim sect which today predominates in Iran, share the same tradition of recitation as the Sunnī majority. Rather it is linguistic. The countries of the southern Middle East and North Africa, in which Arabic is the spoken language of the population, and consequently the language of modern primary education, contain less than a quarter of the world's Muslim population. For the rest, who speak Turkish, Persian, and many other languages, there is necessarily a mismatch between the Arabic of the Koran and the local language of primary education. One cannot achieve literacy in both at one and the same time, and probably not from the same teacher in the same school. The tension is exacerbated by the fact that modernity brings an enhanced concern for the *intelligibility* of scripture among the believers at large. As the Turkish nationalist Ziya Gökalp (d. 1924) put it: 'A country in whose schools the Koran is read in Turkish is one in which everyone, child and adult, knows God's command.'

There are only two clear-cut solutions to this problem: either the believers have to learn Arabic, or the Koran has to be translated. The first solution was propounded with great force by a well-known scholar of medieval Damascus, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), in a book urging his fellow-Muslims to desist from imitating non-Muslims and return to the Straight Path. Indeed, he wished to see all Muslims use Arabic as their language of everyday life. But this is not going to happen; and mass literacy in a foreign language is not a very realistic educational project. The second solution, a translation of the Koran intended not just to supplement but to displace the Arabic original, was taken furthest in the secular Republic of Turkey between the First and Second World Wars; this translation was to have been the centrepiece of an effort to create a form of Islam inoffensive to Turkish nationalism. But as we will see, such attempts go against the grain of Islam, and even in Turkey the project led nowhere. To date, the non-Arab Muslim world shows little sign of adopting the idea of a vernacular scripture in the manner of sixteenth-century Protestantism or twentieth-century Catholicism.

Chapter 4
The interpretation of the Koran

Commentators then and now

A culture in possession of a canonical text, whether a scripture or a classic, can do a variety of things with it, and not all cultures do the same things. Some practices, however, are remarkably widespread, and one of these is the composition of commentaries. Commentaries vary considerably within and between cultures, but in one way or another their concern is to interpret the canonical text. The text needs to be interpreted because, having been composed a long time ago and handed down in a more or less fixed form, it now contains much that is at first sight obscure, irrelevant, or disconcerting. This means that the commentator has a tendency to approach the text with the presuppositions and concerns of his own time, and may seek to realign the meaning of the text accordingly. Rarely is he concerned to answer a strictly historical question of the form: 'Never mind what this means to us now, what exactly did it mean to them then?' But this should not be taken to imply that the meaning of the text is putty in the hands of the commentator. Unlike some postmodernist literary critics, traditional commentators are playing a game with rules. As a consequence, they often find the text

resistant to their interpretative goals and strategies; they wrestle with passages where life would have been so much easier if only Confucius – or Homer, or God – had expressed himself differently.

Just as there is distance between text and commentator, so also there is distance between one commentator and another. Commentators separated by several centuries, by several thousand miles, or by a major sectarian divide may have significantly different presuppositions and concerns. In some ways one of the deepest of such chasms is that separating modern Koranic commentators from their traditional predecessors. 'Modern' in this context excludes most nineteenth-century commentators, whose works tend to represent a continuation of long-established scholastic practice. Even twentieth-century commentators frequently reproduce large amounts of traditional interpretative material; but the ground has shifted under them. It is not just that the Western impact has changed the *material* conditions in which they live. Modern history has also brought with it the global hegemony of a set of *values* alien to traditional Islamic civilization; in historical terms, these are the values of the post-Christian West. (Christianity itself has not been a serious part of the challenge in the last two centuries, and Muslims have not usually found it difficult to withstand the unwanted attentions of Christian missionaries.) How then have modern Koran-commentators responded to the pull of modern values on the words of their scripture?

For purposes of illustration, I shall pick out three characteristic, historically Western values of the emerging global culture: a scientific world-view; a tolerant attitude towards the religious beliefs of others; and an acceptance of women as the equals of men. These values are not, of course, universally accepted (let alone practised) in the West, nor are non-Western cultures constrained to adopt them wholesale. But they are values with which any non-Western culture in the world today has to reckon.

The Koran and the scientific world-view

There is in the Islamic world today a widespread and well-funded industry which consists of reading the truths of modern science back into the Koran. Scripture, in this view, becomes 'a textbook of sciences', and 'teems with scientific facts'. Thus the passage selected in Chapter 2 to describe the creation of man (Q23:12–14) can be read – if suitably reworded – as an anticipation of modern embryology. Or take the verse in which God says of heaven 'We extend it wide' (Q51:47). This can equally be translated 'We are expanding it', yielding a clear reference to a fundamental notion of modern cosmology, the expanding universe (with the significant improvement that it is now God who is doing the expanding). This type of scriptural interpretation, which is by no means confined to Islam, carries a certain risk: science may move on, leaving scripture stranded with some latter-day equivalent of the long-discredited phlogiston theory of combustion. Not surprisingly, the more

sophisticated commentators do not engage in this activity, and some articulate Muslims have strongly condemned it.

Yet even a commentator who does not treat the Koran as a scientific textbook may be perplexed by verses that look positively unscientific. Consider the following passage, to which we will return more than once in this book:

> And question them concerning the township which was bordering the sea, when they transgressed the Sabbath, when their fish came to them on the day of their Sabbath, swimming shorewards, but on the day they kept not Sabbath, they came not unto them. Even so We were trying them for their ungodliness. And when a certain group of them said, 'Why do you admonish people God is about to destroy or to chastise with a terrible chastisement?', they said, 'As an excuse to your Lord; and haply they will be godfearing.' So, when they forgot that which they were reminded of, We delivered those who were forbidding wickedness, and We seized the evildoers with evil chastisement for their ungodliness. And when they turned in disdain from that forbidding We said to them, 'Be you apes, miserably slinking!' (Q7:163–6)

Like much of the Koran, this passage is not an easy one, but the gist of it is clear enough: God tested a community of fishermen among the ancient Israelites by tempting them to fish on the Sabbath, and

found some of them wanting; He punished the wrongdoers by changing them into monkeys. A brief reference to the same incident occurs earlier in the Koran:

> And well you know there were those among you that transgressed the Sabbath, and We said to them, 'Be you apes, miserably slinking!' (Q2:65)

The traditional commentators, with a single exception, had taken such references to metamorphosis quite literally. From their point of view, since God is omnipotent, metamorphosis is hardly a problem; as we will see later, they worried about something quite different, and to them much more bothersome.

Metamorphosis does, however, bother modern commentators. Dramatic violations of the natural order by a personal God do not fit well with the regularities of a scientific world-view. This thought is not new: it had occurred to a few materialists in the early centuries of Islam. But they were marginal, and became more so. In the modern world, by contrast, their point of view is mainstream. The presence of metamorphic monkeys in one's scripture is awkward – just as the Biblical statement that Jonah was 'in the belly of the fish' for three days and nights (Jonah 1:17) can embarrass modern-minded Jews and Christians.

In this changed context, the once isolated view that the metamorphosis spoken of in our verses was only a metaphor came

to seem much more attractive. This view had been advanced by (or in the name of) an early Meccan commentator, Mujāhid ibn Jabr (d. about 722), and generally dismissed. But if we turn to a well-known modern commentary, that written by Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) on the basis of the lectures of Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), we find that the treatment of this aspect of Q2:65 begins and ends with Mujāhid, whose view is endorsed as more plausible than that of the mainstream. The meaning of the verse, we are told, is that the shameless behaviour of the Sabbath-breakers had earned them the contempt of respectable people, who no longer regarded them as fit for human company. It is further argued that if the mainstream view were correct, the story would lose its effectiveness as a warning: people know from their own observation that God does not make a habit of punishing sinners by metamorphosis. God’s custom, we are assured, is one: He treats present generations in the same way as He treated past ones.

This invocation of ‘God’s custom’ (*sunnat Allāh*) is significant. The phrase is quite a common one in the Koran, and the main thing we learn in the relevant verses is that God’s custom is unalterable:

> And thou shalt never find any changing God’s custom, and thou shalt never find any altering God’s custom. (Q35:43).

Thus our modern commentators are engaged in a very traditional exegetical game: playing off one authority against another to get the result they want. Just as they seized on Mujāhid to part company

with the mainstream, so now they appeal to one set of Koranic verses in order to overcome the plain sense of another. At the same time, this move makes their purpose clear. A universe ruled by unchanging divine custom is not quite one governed by the laws of nature, but it is vastly more compatible with it than one in which God arbitrarily overrides the way the world normally works. There is no contradiction, then, between the Koran and science. ʻAbduh and Riḍā were in fact major figures in the attempt to create a modern-minded Islam that has been under way since the late nineteenth century. As might be expected, other commentators have followed their lead in understanding metamorphosis as metaphor, among them Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966), a founding figure of Muslim fundamentalism in Egypt.

This reconciliation of the Koran and science may seem painless, but in reality it is not. It is undignified to have to bend the traditionally accepted meaning of one's scripture to accommodate the values of others, and this indignity is one to which fundamentalists writing more recently than Quṭb have been distinctly sensitive. Thus the well-known Syrian fundamentalist Saʻīd Ḥawwā (d. 1989) denounces the attempt to explain away metamorphosis: the text of the Koran is quite explicit, and there is nothing that calls for taking it in any but its plain sense. A prominent Lebanese Shīʻite commentator of the same period, Muḥammad Jawād Maghniyya (d. 1979), is less categorical, but inclines in the same direction. What ʻAbduh says about divine custom, he observes, may be true in

general, but there are exceptions arising from divine wisdom, such as miracles; and God's treatment of the ancient Israelites was full of such exceptions. Yet this stance is uncomfortable in its own way. A contemporary Iranian mullah who adopts it makes a point of showing that he too is thoroughly familiar with modern notions like 'the evolutionary hypothesis' and 'mutation' (he transcribes this latter term from French, rather than translating it). As this indicates, the unbending literalism of such commentators is not the result of any lack of awareness of the pull of modern science.

Tolerating the beliefs of others

In a modern Western society it is more or less axiomatic that other people's religious beliefs (though not, of course, all forms of religiously motivated behaviour) are to be tolerated, and perhaps even respected. Indeed it would be considered ill-mannered and parochial to refer to the religious views of others as *false* and one's own as *true*; for those fully educated into the elite culture of Western society, the very notion of absolute truth in matters of religion sounds hopelessly out of date. It is, however, a notion that was central to traditional Islam, as it was to traditional Christianity; and in recent centuries it has survived better in Islam.

The Koran has much to say about the treatment of false belief, but the traditional Muslim scholars saw the core of it in two verses. The first they dubbed 'the sword verse':

> Then, when the sacred months are drawn away, slay the polytheists wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they repent, and perform the prayer, and pay the alms, then let them go their way; God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate. (Q9:5)

In other words, you should kill the polytheists unless they convert. A 'polytheist' (*mushrik*) is anyone who makes anyone or anything a 'partner' (*sharīk*) with God; the term extends to Jews and Christians, indeed to all unbelievers. Such a prescription for dealing with people outside one's own religious community is considerably gentler than, for example, the stipulation in the Biblical law of war that 'of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth' (Deut. 20:16). Yet it hardly meshes with a modern sensibility. Fortunately the second verse, dubbed 'the tribute verse', introduces a significant relaxation:

> Fight those who believe not in God and the Last Day and do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden – such men as practise not the religion of truth, being of those who have been given the Book – until they pay the tribute out of hand and have been humbled. (Q9:29)

This is a bit opaque, but it clearly establishes a category of unbelievers who need not be fought once they accept a status which

requires them to pay some kind of tax and endure some kind of humiliation. The scholars agreed that this category included the Jews and Christians (since both had been given 'the Book', that is to say the Bible), and they found reasons to extend it more widely. What we see here is not, of course, *respect* for false religion, but it clearly accords it conditional toleration. This offer of toleration was not, however, universal. At the very least it was agreed that the option was not available to pagan Arabs, though this hardly mattered in practice once that group had ceased to exist.

Despite their salience in the eyes of the scholars, these two verses do not represent the full range of Koranic statements bearing on the question. Consider the following:

> No compulsion is there in religion. Rectitude has become clear from error. (Q2:256)

We can dub this the 'no compulsion' verse. It does not compromise the notion of absolute religious truth, but it strongly suggests that the true religion can nonetheless coexist with any and all forms of false religion. For the traditional scholars, as we will see later, such a declaration of unconditional – not to say indiscriminate – tolerance was an embarrassment; they had to find ways and means of getting it out of the way.

For modern-minded Muslims, by contrast, the verse is literally a godsend, scriptural proof that Islam is a religion of broad and

general toleration. Thus when we turn to the commentary of ‘Abduh and Riḍā, we find that the prime concern is to resist the allegation that Islam is a religion spread by the sword. The ‘no compulsion’ verse accordingly takes on the status of one of the ‘great principles’ and ‘mighty pillars’ of Islam. Quṭb is in the same tradition. He sketches the background of Christian intolerance in late antiquity; then came Islam, and one of the first things it did was to announce this great principle of ‘no compulsion’. Freedom of belief (note the Western turn of phrase) is fundamental to human rights, and it was Islam that first proclaimed this value.

Ḥawwā, representing a more recent vein of fundamentalism than Quṭb, is notably less lyrical. In the relevant section of his commentary on the verse, he has nothing to say about great principles, freedom of belief, or human rights. Instead he begins by noting that all authorities are agreed that an Arab pagan has only the choice of Islam or the sword, whereas Jews and Christians also have the option of paying tribute; the standing of other religious communities, he remarks, has been a matter of some dispute. This, he says, is the basis on which Muslims have proceeded down the centuries, and in interpreting the ‘no compulsion’ verse this framework must be taken as given. The upshot is that we have been commanded to fight the unbelievers, but forbidden to compel them to convert except in the case of Arab pagans. At no point does Ḥawwā flinch at the idea that Islam is a religion of the sword.

The contrast between Ḥawwā and the other commentators we have drawn on reappears in connection with the tribute which non-Muslims are to pay according to the terms of Q9:29. Quṭb refuses to discuss the details of the topic, stigmatizing it as one which has no practical relevance whatever given the current predicament of Islam. Maghniyya likewise regards talk of such tribute today as so much hot air; he further argues that the Koranic verse was in fact concerned solely with a particular historical context at the beginning of Islamic history – a time when the infidels of the Arabian peninsula constituted a dangerous anti-Muslim 'fifth column'. The Christians of Lebanon, he allows us to infer, need not live in fear of being confronted with renewed demands for tribute. Ḥawwā, by contrast, thinks that it is high time that the old practice of levying a tax on unbelievers was restored. His concession to the distemper of the times is a certain relaxation of the traditional rules. Non-Muslims living in an Islamic state will, of course, have to accept that Islam is the state religion, and that power will be in the hands of the Muslims. As non-Muslims, they will be required to pay a tax in lieu of military service. Should they wish to serve in the army rather than pay the tax, the Muslims will consider this request; but Ḥawwā is confident that in practice non-Muslims will prefer to be taxed. There is perhaps a further element of fundamentalist generosity implicit in this proposal: nothing has been said about humiliation.

The equality of men and women

For a thousand years before the Western impact began, Muslims (like the Romans before them) were aware that northern European males had peculiar attitudes towards their womenfolk. They did not adequately wrap them up, and paid excessive attention to their opinions. This cultural idiosyncrasy was a cause of occasional concern to the males of northern Europe themselves; the Englishman William Harvey (d. 1657), better known for his work on the circulation of the blood, was of the view that 'we Europaeans knew not how to order or governe our woemen, and that the Turkes were the only people used them wisely'. But until modern times, Muslims had no reason to look upon this northern European peculiarity as more than an ethnographic curiosity, comparable perhaps to the deviant attitudes towards women found among some of the less civilized tribal populations of the Islamic world. Since the nineteenth century, however, this situation has changed drastically. Among northern Europeans and populations of northern European origin, the roles of men and women have become yet more distant from traditional Islamic patterns; there is even an overt feminist movement active in these societies. And at the same time, this northern European pattern has achieved some degree of normative status in the global culture at large. An international gathering of the world's women which took place in China in 1995 was an uncomfortable experience for several Islamic governments, not to mention its Chinese hosts.

Had modernity emerged from traditional China, we might muse, premodern Muslim attitudes to relations between men and women would probably have continued to seem quite normal. But given that modernity is in historical fact a product of the West, it is not surprising that enormous tension should have built up around a verse like this:

> Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that God has preferred one of them over another, and for that they have expended of their property. Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God's guarding. And those you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches, and beat them. If they then obey you, look not for any way against them; God is All-high, All-great. (Q4:34).

As we will see later, there was room for a variety of interpretations of this verse in the traditional Islamic world. But two things are hard to deny: the verse endorses male dominance, and it sanctions it by according to the husband a right, among other things, to beat a rebellious wife. Male dominance was far from being a novelty in monotheist scripture. The God of Genesis tells the woman 'thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee' (Gen. 3:16); while the New Testament lays down that a woman should 'learn in silence with all subjection' (1Tim. 2:11) – a counsel no longer much observed in modern secular education. Beating a wife,

however, was new to scripture – though not, of course, to society. As will be seen later, the main concern of the traditional commentators was to distinguish legitimate physical punishment from assault and battery; but what to them was common sense is to modern ears outrageous. As a result, no modern commentator worth his salt can fail to rise to the challenge of this verse in one way or another.

Let us look first at what the modern commentators have to say on male dominance. None of them calls the basic principle in question, and they all make remarks that would play badly in the modern West: that men are better looking than women and think better; that women's responses are intuitive and spontaneous, whereas those of men are marked by gravity and forethought; that great achievements in all spheres of life are the work of men, with exceptions so few that they prove the rule; and so forth.

Nevertheless, the commentators also say things that go in the other direction, making points that their traditional predecessors did not make, and in many cases would not have made. Thus they may emphasize that the verse is concerned only with relations between husband and wife, not between men and women in general. Even within the marital context, they work to limit the husband's authority. 'Abduh stresses that what is involved is in no way an absolute power which strips the wife of the exercise of will and choice. Maghniyya remarks that the husband is not a 'dictatorial' (*diktātūrī*) ruler. The Palestinian Muḥammad 'Izzat Darwaza (d.

1984) argues that the verse does not limit a woman's property rights, nor does it deprive her of her freedom in the social and political spheres. At the same time the commentators' sense of the inequality of men and women is a qualified one. Without calling in question the statistical differences between them, Riḍā observes that numerous women excel their husbands in all sorts of ways; Maghniyya goes so far as to say that many a woman is better than a thousand men. The Iranian Nuṣrat Amīn (Bānū-yi Iṣfahānī, d. 1983), one of the few women to have written a Koran commentary, likewise emphasizes this qualification.

These mixed signals may remind us of the language of the declaration on family life which was adopted by the Southern Baptists in 1998. A wife, according to this document, is to 'submit graciously' to her husband's authority. And yet this authority is referred to by the ambivalent phrase 'servant leadership', and in the next breath the wife is said to be 'equal to' her husband.

The by now predictable exception to all this is Ḥawwā, whose signals show no mixture whatever. For him, as for the author of the Book of Genesis, it is clear that a man is to rule over his wife; he freely uses terms like 'domination' (*sayṭara*). Without the slightest apology, he includes among the grounds of male dominance men's superior qualities of intellect and judgement. He excoriates the pedlars of the politics of freedom and equality for women; he stands for a world in which men still – as he vividly expresses it – grow beards and wear turbans.

Turning to the husband's right to beat a rebellious wife, it is obvious from the start how strongly the commentators are reacting to an intrusive Western sensibility. The commentary of 'Abduh and Riḍā polemizes against those who ape the manners and customs of the Europeans, and who thus make a big issue of the legality of beating a rebellious wife. They are asked to get their heads out of the clouds: how, in real life, do they propose to deal with the problem of such wives? What serious objection could there be to a virtuous and pious husband applying moderate physical pressure to a wife who is out of control? Don't they know that many of their European role models likewise beat those educated, refined, half-dressed, half-naked, sexy, saucy wives of theirs? Doing so is a necessity which even those who go to extremes in deferring to educated women cannot dispense with. How then can one quarrel with the fact that such beating is permitted in a religion that is shared by all sorts and conditions of men? This plea for sanity was not, however, entirely successful. Darwaza in his defence of the Koranic provisions on the rebellious wife can still say that no sensible person could see them as unjust; but he soon concedes that beating a wife may seem a strange idea to us today, though in reality it is not so. It is a backhanded testimony to the power of this new sensibility that Quṭb feels it necessary to end his discussion of the issue by pulling divine rank: it is, he points out, God who has established these norms, and once He has spoken there can be no further argument on the subject.

Once the principle is established, all commentators are concerned to emphasize the limits to the husband's right to beat his wife – limits which they find set out in traditional Muslim literature. They stress, for example, that exercising this right is a last resort. Maghniyya states with some exaggeration that all the traditional scholars agree that it is better not to beat one's wife. Quṭb in a strongly worded passage avers that there is no license in the verse for treating a woman like a chained dog; if Muslims have behaved in such a way, this represents the degradation of their customs, not the will of their God.

What is notable about Ḥawwā's commentary in this instance is its utter perfunctoriness. He does not accommodate, engage, or denounce modern sensibility. Instead, he studiously ignores it.

With all three of the values we have considered, it is apparent that the modern commentators divide into two broad groups. Commentators in the first group tend to be strongly affected by the relevant Western value, and on occasion to bend their scripture to meet it. These are the Islamic modernists in the tradition of Muḥammad 'Abduh. Commentators in the second group brace themselves against the pull of the Western value, and make a point of not bending scripture to accommodate it. These are the Islamic fundamentalists of recent decades. The first group has more of a tendency to swim with the Western tide, the second to go against it; but both groups are acutely aware of it.

We can also discern a significant change over time. Schematically, the traditional commentators are followed by the modernists, who in turn are followed by the fundamentalists. One implication of this is that the fundamentalists are twice removed from their traditional forebears. Moreover, the Western values they confront are not just current fads, but integral components of the world the human race is likely to live in for some time to come. These considerations suggest that the present strength of the fundamentalist interpretation of scripture in the Islamic world may not represent a stable equilibrium.

Chapter 5
The very idea of scripture

True believers have often had to share the world with sceptics and materialists, from Ajita Kehśakambalin, who in ancient India had the audacity not to believe in reincarnation, to Yamagata Bantō (d. 1821), a Japanese thinker who held that ‘in this world there are no gods, Buddhas, or ghosts, nor are there strange or miraculous things’. The Koran itself describes people who make the following claim:

> There is nothing but our present life; we die, and we live, and nothing but Time (*dahr*) destroys us. (Q45:24)

The scholars accordingly termed such people ‘Dahrīs’; we met them previously as materialists with a dismissive attitude to metamorphosis. As to sceptics, the ninth-century Ibn al-Rāwandī held ‘that the Koran is not the speech of someone with wisdom, and contains contradictions, errors, and absurdities’. But in the traditional Islamic world, as among other monotheist communities of the time, such sceptics and materialists tended to be fairly discreet. Their place was in the closet.

The modern world has been a very different sort of place. People of this kind not only came out of the closet, in a real sense they took over. If we think in terms of a range from hard belief to hard unbelief, the bulk of the population in the modern West has probably been located towards the middle; but the cutting edge of the culture has lain significantly closer to unbelief. The result has been a climate which, despite genuine tolerance and professed respect, is inhospitable to true believers. It has made their certainties appear as intellectual naivety, their zeal as ill-bred fanaticism.

A major reason for this state of affairs has been the paradigmatic status of science in the modern world. This status has frequently been challenged, and with visibly increasing success in recent decades. If for any reason scientific progress were to come to an end, the level of credulity could be expected to rise dramatically in Western societies, and the twentieth century might come to appear as a transient age of unbelief. But, as of the beginning of the twenty-first century, this has not yet happened. We still live in a global culture whose secular and scientific orientation puts strain not just on the particular claims of particular scriptures, but on the very idea of scripture. What sense could it make in a progressive, scientific world to attach indefeasible authority to the word of a *god* spoken in the *past*?

As might be expected, different cultures have reacted to this strain in different ways. In North America, for example, true believers are

strong enough to engage in cultural warfare against the mainstream, but have currently no chance of prevailing over it. In East Asia today there are no canonical texts with hegemonic status except, for the time being, in North Korea; and the Japanese, with levels of unbelief as high as any in the world, have proved worthy heirs of Bantō. What is striking about the Islamic world is that, of all the major cultural domains, it seems to have been the least penetrated by irreligion; and in the last few decades, it has been the fundamentalists who have increasingly represented the cutting edge of the culture.

It follows that we should not expect attitudes to the idea of scripture in the modern Islamic world to mirror those which we are familiar with in the West (let alone the disuse into which the classics of the Confucian tradition have fallen). The Western evolution has been dominated by two phenomena, both products of the nineteenth century. The first was the emergence of the 'higher criticism' of the Bible: a rigorous philological approach which treats its object no differently from any other text which happens to have come down to us from the past, and reveals it as a pastiche of sources of varying dates and tendencies. The second was the phenomenon of soft belief – the willingness of large numbers of mainstream believers to give ground to this higher criticism, and the scientific outlook of which it is a part, and to be satisfied with salvaging a residual religiosity. Neither of these phenomena has been prominent in the Islamic world, and particularly not the first. As we will see later, modern

scholarly methods when applied to the Koran do not have so disturbing an effect of turning scripture into pastiche; but they do presuppose an approach to the emergence of the Koran which is uncompromisingly historical.

Traditional Islam had not been resistant to the notion that the revelation reflected the milieu in which it was revealed. (There was no parallel among the Muslim scholars to the radically ahistorical character of some Indian attitudes to the Vedas, according to which the sacred text could never be construed to refer to a historical person or place.) For example, the well-known jurist Shāfiʿī (d. 820) argued that when God speaks of the Prophet permitting the eating of 'nice things' and forbidding that of 'nasty things' (Q7:157), we have to understand these words in terms of the dietary preferences which prevailed among the Arabs at the time. But traditional Islam could never have made the leap from the idea of a scripture which *engages* the society in which it was revealed to the notion of one which is a *product* of it. For most Muslims in the modern world any significant move in this direction is still hardly an option, and it is unlikely to become one in the foreseeable future.

A couple of exceptions from modern Egypt will suffice to prove the rule. The first takes us back to 1947, when Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallāh, a junior teacher at Cairo University who had learnt his Koran in the village school, submitted a dissertation on the narrative artistry of the book.

Viewing scripture as literature was not in itself dangerous heresy; there was ample traditional precedent for this, and Sayyid Quṭb wrote on artistic representation in the Koran. The problem was Khalafallāh's insidious conception of divine literary licence: he wanted to understand the stories told in the Koran as literature in a sense which abandoned the claim that they embodied literal historical truth. God's concern was to move the Arabs of the day to embrace Islam, and He accordingly addressed them in terms that spoke to their own beliefs and attitudes. For example, His disparaging references to females (e.g. Q37:149) reflected an appeal to the presuppositions of the Arab environment. Likewise prophets tended to be presented generically, not as individuals, and in a manner which foreshadowed Muḥammad. Whether such representations were historically accurate was neither here nor there.

Khalafallāh thought that this was a way to insulate the Koran, the divine authorship of which he had not the slightest intention of questioning, from the inappropriate historical criticisms of Orientalists and missionaries; the former, he averred, had understood nothing of the narrative style and technique of the book. But in the course of the storm which broke over him, and lasted for several months, his elders and betters, particularly those at the ancient and prestigious Islamic university of the Azhar, viewed his dissertation rather as an attack on the truth of God's word. 'The Koran', as one of his adversaries declares, 'tells the truth when it

conflicts with history, whereas history lies in this conflict.' Khalafallāh's work was denounced as a new plague worse than cholera. He himself was labelled an unbeliever, one implication being that he could not be legally married to a Muslim woman. It is remarkable that he succeeded in quietly publishing a somewhat revised version of his dissertation in 1951, which was then reprinted several times. But his ideas did not have much of a future, and his career was ruined.

The next time round, the game was played for higher stakes. In 1992 Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, likewise a teacher at Cairo University, was being considered for promotion to a full professorship. The outcome of what would normally have been a routine academic process was a legal nightmare for him and his wife: a group of fundamentalist lawyers sued in court to have the couple separated on the ground that Abū Zayd's publications revealed him to be an unbeliever. The suit was initially rejected, but a court of appeal agreed with the lawyers, and its judgement was sustained by the Court of Cassation in a decree of 1996. In the meantime, Abū Zayd and his wife had prudently left Egypt. In retrospect, none of this is very surprising. Fundamentalists were far more powerful in the 1990s than they had been in the 1940s, and Abū Zayd was a Muslim secularist who had established himself as a mordant critic of their thinking. Already before his legal tribulations began, he had derided the fundamentalists as 'the forces of superstition and myth', and he

had deplored the heated Muslim reaction to Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*.

Though a more sophisticated thinker than Khalafallāh, Abū Zayd's central point about the Koran was the same. If the text was a message sent to the Arabs of the seventh century, then of necessity it was formulated in a manner which took for granted historically specific aspects of their language and culture. The Koran thus took shape in a human setting. It was a 'cultural product' – a phrase Abū Zayd used several times, and which was highlighted by the Court of Cassation when it determined him to be an unbeliever. Abū Zayd made it clear that in using such language he was by no means denying the divine origin of the message. But as he put it, we cannot subject the sender of the message to scientific study; in consequence, linguistic analysis – reading the text in the context of its culture – is the *only* way we can achieve an understanding of the message. By implication, the entire approach of traditional scholarship, as perpetuated by the fundamentalists, was radically flawed. What it had done was to turn the Koran from a message into an icon – an incarnation of God's word with a status comparable to that of Jesus in Christian doctrine.

As always, God – or secularism – is in the details. One of many reasons given by the Court of Cassation for rejecting Abū Zayd's claim to be a Muslim was that he denied the existence of the genies – the *jinn*, as they are called in Arabic. These spirits are as vividly real in the world of the Koran as are demons and unclean spirits in

that of the New Testament, where some two thousand Gadarene swine threw themselves into the Sea of Galilee as a result of demonic possession (Mark 5:13). As we have seen, the Koran tells us that the genies were created of fire. Unlike the evil spirits of the Gospels, they are not all bad: they were created to serve God (Q51:56), and while many will end up in hell (Q11:119), there are Muslims among them (Q72:14); this came about when some genies overheard a recitation of the Koran, and were so impressed that they went off to preach the message to their fellows (Q46:29). In addition to this presence in the Koran, the genies are also strongly entrenched in Egyptian folk beliefs; in this sense they correspond not just to Biblical spirits, but also to the elves and fairies of European folklore.

Did Abū Zayd then go so far as to deny the very existence of the genies? What he did was to explain that the reason for their presence in the Koran was that they formed part of the culture of the Arabs at the time when the book was taking shape. It was only by appealing to existing Arab conceptions of communication between genies and humans that the notion of divine revelation could be made intelligible to them. This is not an explicit denial of the existence of the genies, but it is certainly hard to imagine that someone who speaks about them in this way could actually believe in them. Such scepticism would not shock many people in the West: one can be a mainstream Christian without believing in demons and

unclean spirits. But in his own religious community, Abū Zayd, though he has his supporters, could not be described as mainstream.

The keynote of the current Islamic reaction to the global culture of secularism and science is thus the intransigence of hard belief rather than the flexibility of soft belief. This is part and parcel of the unparalleled strength of fundamentalism in the contemporary Islamic world. How long it can retain this strength, and what might happen if it were to lose it, are questions which would take us well beyond the foreseeable future – though Iran may be a country to watch. In the meantime, the idea of scripture inherited from the traditional Muslim past remains firmly unreconstructed, and it is to that past that we should now turn.

Part Three
The Koran in the traditional Muslim world

Chapter 6
The Koran as codex

The rise of the codex

A written text, unlike an oral one, has to look like something. There has to be writing, and the writing has to be visible, for example through the application of black ink to white paper. Moreover, if the text is of any length, it is likely to exceed the capacity of a single piece of the material it is being written on. The multiple pieces will then have to be assembled in some way that keeps them together and in order. These problems are faced by any culture which is committed to preserving substantial texts in writing, and they can be solved in a variety of ways. The literature of ancient Egypt was written on rolls of papyrus, that of ancient Mesopotamia on clay tablets, that of ancient China on strips of bamboo held together with string, and so forth.

At the time when Muḥammad made his appearance, a major revolution in this technology was well advanced in the Near East. The traditional way of preserving a substantial text in the Greek culture which held sway in the Near East for most of the millennium prior to the rise of Islam had been the papyrus roll, which the Greeks had borrowed from the Egyptians. (Clay tablets, by contrast,

had fallen into complete disuse after the first century of our era.) Had the present book been published in this form, you would now be rolling up the last of Part Two on the left, and unrolling the beginning of Part Three on the right; there would be no such thing as ‘turning over’, since unless the papyrus had been recycled the back would be blank. In fact, however, what you are holding in your hands is a *codex*. The basic unit is the leaf, itself made up of two pages of writing; you read the front first, and then turn over and read the back. The pages are bound together and placed between a back and a front cover, the solidity of which will depend on the price you paid for the book. All this is second nature to us; but traditional Indian or Chinese books, even when recognizable as such, are not quite the same.

This way of putting together a lengthy written text dates from around the turn of our era. It encountered considerable conservative resistance; it must have taken some centuries before it felt right to read Homer from a codex, and to this day the Torah in a Jewish synagogue is a roll (or a scroll, which is the same thing). But the Christians adopted the codex for their scriptures at a very early date, and by the time of Muḥammad it was the normal format for writings of any length. Koranic texts on rolls are known from the early Islamic period; a significant number of fragments survive in a collection from a small building in the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. But in general, we can safely think of the Koran as a codex from the time of its collection. The only culture

shock to which a Western reader is exposed on inspecting a Koran, however early, is that the back and front of the book are reversed – a consequence of the fact that the Arabic script runs from right to left.

Typically, the leaves of a Koran in the early Islamic period would be papyrus or, more likely, parchment; paper only gradually took their place after the art of making it had been acquired from the Chinese in the middle of the eighth century. As to the way codices were bound, Fig. 2 shows a leather binding that once held part of the Koran. The flap on the right folds over to protect the fore-edge of the leaves; the book you hold in your hands, like modern books in general, lacks this amenity.

2. Koran bindings. *Above*: The flap on the right of this detached binding is a feature already found in the fourth-century Gnostic codices from Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. *Below*: Two intact nineteenth-century Korans with the same feature. That on the left is from West Africa, that on the right from the Sudan. The thong attached to the flap of the West African Koran can be tied around the volume to give added protection; this feature also appears at Nag Hammadi. These Korans were studied by Adrian Brockett.

The idea of a sacred book

We tend to use the term 'sacred book' rather loosely. It is one thing to believe that the *text* contained in a book is sacred (because revealed by God, or the like), and quite another to ascribe such a status to the *book* as a physical object. All monotheists regard their scriptures as sacred in the first sense, but standard Jewish and Christian doctrine does not extend this sanctity to the second sense. A Bible is, of course, an object to be treated with some respect, but it is not a *sacred* object. There were Muslims who saw the Koran in the same light; but the majority, arguably with Koranic support, came to see the codex itself as sacred. So well established did this view become among Muslims that it seems to have rubbed off onto the Karaites – a Jewish sect which arose against an Islamic background in eighth-century Iraq.

The practical implications of this sanctity of the Koranic codex in everyday life have often caught the eye of European observers, pointing up the difference between the two cultures. Busbecq, who spent eight years in the Ottoman Empire as an ambassador in the mid-sixteenth century, remarked that for the Turks ‘it is a fearful offence for a man to sit, even unwittingly, on the Koran (which is their Bible)’. Edward Lane, in a description of the ‘manners and customs of the modern Egyptians’ published in 1836, described the honour which Muslims show to the Koran as very striking, and observed that they ‘generally take care never to hold it or suspend it in such a manner as that it shall be below the girdle’. A vendor who sold me a miniature Koran in Istanbul – the kind that might be used for a good-luck charm – impressed on me that I should take the same care. Jacques Jomier, describing the place of the Koran in the daily life of Egypt in the mid-twentieth century, noted that no practising Muslim would allow a copy of the Koran to be anywhere but at the top of a pile of books. For yet another example of the reverence with which a Koran is treated, see Fig. 3. In what follows, we shall see how some issues of this kind were treated by the traditional Muslim scholars.

3. An Egyptian reading the Koran in the Mosque of the Prophet, Medina. Whereas the Muslim sits on the floor, the Koran sits on its *kursī* or 'chair'. In a culture where people traditionally sat on the floor, a chair was often a mark of authority (compare the phrase 'ex cathedra'). In Q2:255 God's 'throne' is His *kursī*. The *kursī* in this picture looks new, but the X-shaped design is very ancient: Tutankhamun was already sitting on something like this in the fourteenth century BC. The practice of seating the Koran on a *kursī* seems to go back at least to the early ninth century of our era.

In a passage emphasizing its own exalted character, the Koran speaks as follows:

> It is surely a noble Koran in a hidden Book – none but the purified touch it – a sending down from the Lord of all Being. (Q56:77–80)

The meaning is not quite transparent because of the ambiguity of ‘it’. Is it the ‘noble Koran’ in general that only the purified touch? Or is it specifically the ‘hidden Book’, perhaps an archetype located in heaven? If God is making a statement of fact, as the wording suggests, then He has to be referring to the ‘hidden Book’; for in this world, regrettably, all sorts of impure people are seen to touch copies of the Koran. But as the commentators point out, God could be laying down the law in the form of a statement of fact. The meaning would then be that only the purified are *permitted* to touch copies of the Koran, and the reference would be to copies found here in this world. This in fact was the majority view.

There are two aspects to this legal prescription. The first concerns Muslims. A Muslim may find himself – or herself – in a state of ritual impurity for a variety of reasons, most of which can be remedied by washing. While in such a state, then, a Muslim should not touch the Koran. The second aspect concerns non-Muslims, whose impurity is irremediable short of conversion to Islam. Unbelievers, accordingly, should never touch the Koran according to the majority view. Thus Muslim warriors were prohibited from taking copies of the book on raids into non-Muslim territory; these copies might fall into the hands of the unbelievers, and thus be defiled. Within this broad framework there was, as always, room for subtle legal distinctions. One eighth-century scholar is said to have allowed the ritually impure to touch the *margins* of a copy of the Koran, but not the writing itself. Another early Muslim had no

qualms about sending his non-Muslim slave to fetch a Koran which was enclosed in its protective wrapping, though some thought even this disrespectful.

4. A Koran school as depicted by a fifteenth-century Persian artist. In the twelfth-century Persian poem which this miniature illustrates, a ten-year-old boy meets a girl at Koran school (*maktab*), and they embark on a chaste romance that lasts for the rest of their lives. The presence of girls at such schools was nothing abnormal in traditional Iran. The poet describes them as sitting 'tablet-mate' with the boys, but the artist has put boys on the left and girls on the right; a boy holds a tablet at the far left, and a girl holds one at the far right. In the centre, the hero and heroine share a Koran, while behind them the schoolmaster points to a passage in another with his stick. Everyone sits on the floor; the three 'chairs' (the word used in Persian is *raḥl*, literally a camel saddle) are reserved for the Korans, and have the same X-shaped form as in Fig. 3.

The reader who has entered into the spirit of Islamic legal thinking will perhaps have anticipated a further ramification of this

prohibition of impure touch. What goes for the Koran as a whole must surely apply also to a part of it. Consider then the case of a schoolchild learning to write Koranic texts on his tablet in the course of his primary education. On the one hand, the Koran was the foundation of Islamic primary education (see Fig. 4); as Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) put it, teaching children the Koran is one of the distinctive symbols of the religion. Yet on the other hand, children are not yet obligated to perform the rituals which render an adult Muslim ritually pure. Confronted with this dilemma, the scholars inclined to the view that the needs of education took precedence (some even allowed the teaching of the Koran to non-Muslim children). But they did draw lines. For example, there was an insistence that the children should not be allowed to erase Koranic passages from their tablets with their feet.

Figure 5. (*opposite*) The creation of an Islamic coinage. The first coin is a standard Persian silver drachm of Khusraw II (ruled 590–628), a contemporary of Muḥammad and the last successful ruler of the Sasanian Empire before it was conquered by the Arabs. The king's head dominates the obverse, while the reverse shows a Zoroastrian fire-altar with a priest on either side. The second coin was minted under Arab rule after the conquest. Like the Germanic conquerors of the late Roman world, the new rulers continued the existing coinage. But something has changed: an inscription in Arabic, added in the margin of the obverse, says: 'In the name of God.' The third coin dates from 698 or 699. Here the symbolism of the evil empire has finally disappeared, and in its place we have Arabic inscriptions proclaiming the Islamic message. In the middle of the obverse is an Islamic credo: 'There is no god but God alone, without companion.' Around it is written: 'In the name of God. This dirhem was minted in Kūfa in the year 79.' (A dirhem is a drachm, and 79 is the year of the Hijra.) In the middle of the reverse is Sūra 112 in a text identical with our own, but with the first two words omitted. The inscription in the margin consists of the affirmation that 'Muḥammad is the messenger of God' (Q48:29) followed by a somewhat deviant version of Q9:33 (or Q61:9): 'He sent him with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may uplift it above every religion, though the unbelievers be averse.

A more worrisome question was the handling of coins. From the 690s onwards, it was normal practice for Muslim rulers to issue coins bearing Koranic verses (see Fig. 5); this could be seen as a rather effective way to broadcast the Islamic message. But would it not follow that such coins should be touched only by Muslims in a state of ritual purity? Some upheld this view, while others objected that in the nature of things coins had to be handled by all and sundry. A pleasing compromise position was that the ritually impure might handle such coins through a layer of cloth; but could unbelievers be relied on to behave with such delicacy towards Muslim scripture? There was thus a clear and irresolvable conflict between the desire to proclaim God's word to the unbelievers and the shudder at the thought of them touching it.

Going back to complete copies of the Koran, a further issue which arose was whether they could be bought and sold – or would this be trafficking in God's word, a practice for which the Koran condemned the Jews (Q3:187)? Some scholars disapproved of both buying and selling, some felt it was better to buy than to sell, some had no objection to either; as one of the latter put it, the copyist received only the price of his materials and the recompense of his writing. How else, after all, was a copyist to live, and if there were no copyists, where were Muslims to get their Korans from? (A similar logic applied to the question of the remuneration of schoolteachers who instructed children in the Koran; the alternative, as one Companion of the Prophet is said to have expressed it, was

that people would be illiterate.) There were, of course, pious Muslims who copied the Koran without being professional copyists; we know of a scion of a Syrian princely family around the time of the Crusades who was blessed with a fine hand, and made over forty copies in the course of his life – his other great passion being hunting. But a supply from sources such as this could hardly have met the widespread demand.

Again, the problem could extend to Koranic quotations. For this reason one early scholar worried whether coins bearing scriptural texts could properly be used in buying and selling at all. A colleague responded that it is not the Koranic inscriptions with which one makes purchases, but the gold or silver of which the coin is made – if you go shopping with a bit of scripture written on a rag, no one will sell you a thing. This is the same argument as we encountered in the minority view that the codex as such is just the materials with which it is written.

We can end this cascade of practical problems with the question how to dispose of a worn-out or disintegrating Koran (such as the one I am using in writing this book) once it has reached the end of its useful life. Obviously God's word should not be casually discarded, with all the consequent risk of contact with impurity. A variety of solutions were countenanced, singly or in combination. If the material allowed it, one might wipe the ink off the pages (but what if the water containing the dissolved ink then fell on the ground?). One might bury the book – suitably wrapped, and taking

care to ensure that people would not walk over the site. Or one might put it away in a secure place. This last solution accounts for the cache of early Koranic texts from Damascus mentioned above, and for others such as that found a few decades ago in the roof space of the Great Mosque of Ṣan‘ā’, the capital of Yemen. The Muslims were not the first to adopt such practices: Buddhists in Central Asia were burying worn-out manuscripts in clay pots as early as the first century of our era. Comparable customs existed among the Jews, though the most famous example – the Cairo Geniza – dates only from Islamic times.

In this respect at least, electronic copies of the Koran should prove a marked simplification. In the meantime, the Īālibān were reported in 1997 to have banned the use of paper bags in the part of Afghanistan then under their control; their reasoning was that recycled paper might contain pages from copies of the Koran.

Chapter 7
The Koran as text

Strategies for preserving a text

A culture that is concerned to preserve a written text will not necessarily set much store by reproducing an exact wording. Greek papyri of the third century BC offer texts of Homer in which, in relation to our own distinctly uniform text, whole lines are added or dropped. In the Islamic world, the standard life of the Prophet by Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767 or 768) was transmitted in the century after his death in forms too divergent for us to reconstruct an original text behind them. By our own standards of textual fidelity, both instances are slightly shocking. But the attitude of a culture towards faithful transmission need not be either uniform or constant. It is clear that Muslims in the early centuries of Islam thought God's words more deserving of exact reproduction than those of Ibn Isḥāq. It is equally clear that over time they moved in the direction of more faithful transmission of both.

There are two basic strategies a culture can adopt in seeking to preserve a text in a canonical form. One is the 'once and for all' strategy of creating a permanent and definitive embodiment of the text that will still be valid 'a hundred ages hence'. In Han China, a

standard text of the Confucian classics was inscribed on stone in 175–83, and was on display at the imperial academy. As the Chinese case suggests, this strategy is best attempted by the state. In the case of the Koran, we are told that ‘Uthmān (ruled 644–56), the Caliph responsible for its collection, retained a master-copy in his own possession; but it does not seem to have acted as a textual authority of last resort for posterity, and one report has it that it was destroyed on the day he was killed. Perhaps this was as it should be. Nothing is for ever; even the Han stone classics were destroyed through the vicissitudes of history within a decade of their completion, and only fragments survive.

The other strategy is to entrust the preservation of the text to the copyists of the future. This involves a more disseminated risk. Copyists may be honest, competent, and conscientious, but they may also be none of these things. The hope here is that the text will be transmitted in so many different lines, and be so well-known to the community, that the inevitable errors will have no chance of surviving and replicating. In the case of the Koran, this strategy was broadly successful. Errors did, of course, occur, and there is discussion of the delicate question what you should do on finding one in someone else’s Koran (it would be wrong just to leave it, but then again you do not want to deface an elegant copy through your calligraphic ineptness). But in the copying of the text down the centuries, such new errors did not become established; on the

contrary, the fidelity of the transmission is demonstrated by the fact that very early anomalies in the text have been faithfully preserved.

The success of this strategy is not attributable to piety and goodwill alone. There are at least two other ways in which a culture can strengthen such transmission. One is to have a strong tradition of oral recitation of the text to reinforce the written transmission; we will come to this in the next chapter. The other is to surround the bare text with a supporting apparatus of scholarship which ensures that the text is thoroughly understood (whether or not the understanding is that of the original author or authors). This can be even more important for orally transmitted texts than for written ones. Though many Brahmins recited the Vedas without much idea what they meant, the development of linguistic analysis in ancient India is a fine example of the way in which understanding a text can assist in its accurate transmission; whereas the textual disarray of the Avesta, the oral 'scripture' of the Zoroastrians, provides a grim warning of what happens when a text is transmitted among a people who no longer know what it means. In the Muslim case, for all that we are dealing with a written text, the apparatus of scholarship is impressively large and ramified. Much of it takes the form of independent works about one aspect or another of the Koran; a genre we have already encountered is the commentary, and later in this chapter we will come to works on variant readings. But some important elements of this apparatus may appear with the text itself, as part of the packaging, so to speak (though in contrast to the

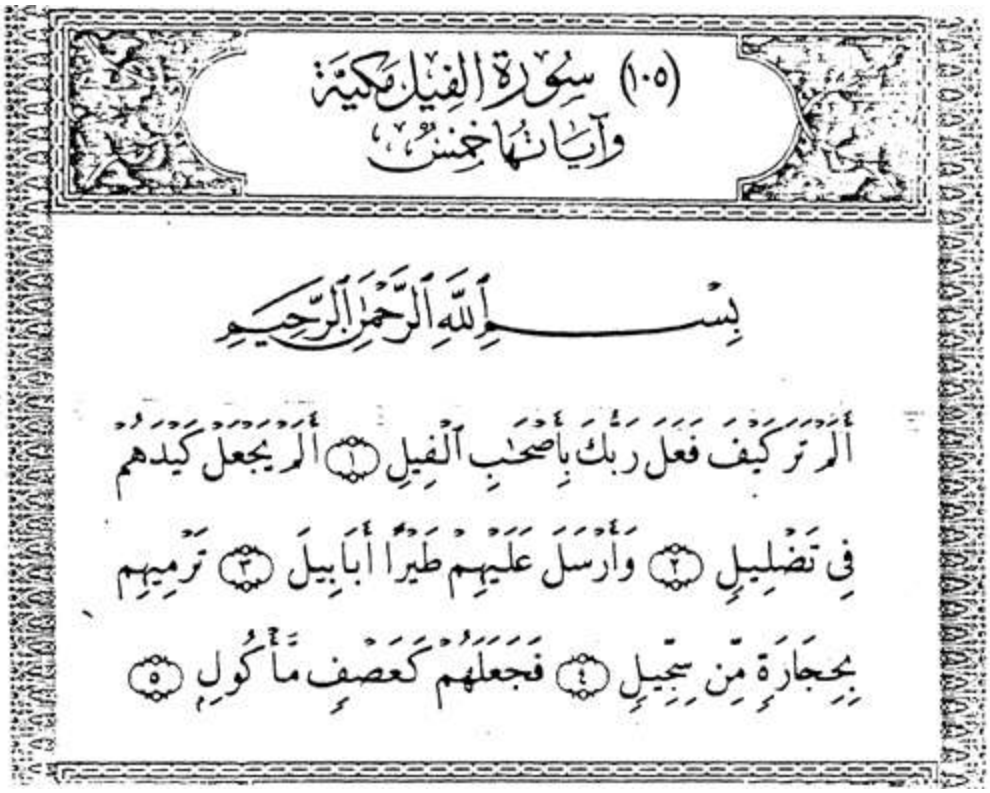
Hebrew Bible, there is no use of the margin for textual notes). It is these elements that will concern us here.

Black, red, and yellow

Consider the passage from the Koran reproduced from the standard Egyptian edition in Fig. 6. Though it consists only of a few lines, it contains a complete Sūra (or chapter), the 105th of the 114 which make up the book. The reproduction you are looking at suffers, like the original from which it is taken, from the exigencies of printing for a mass market: everything bar the paper appears in black. Muslims today are used to this, but it would not have pleased Abū ʻAmr al-Dānī (d. 1053), a respected Koranic scholar from Cordova who settled in Denia, in what was then Muslim Spain. But before we get to the matter of colour, there are some prior points to attend to.

The most obvious thing in the reproduction which is *not* God's word is the decorative border. In a fine copy such a border can be very attractive, but it is entirely optional; some manuscripts have it, some do not.

The next thing we need to eliminate is the two short lines in the frame at the top:


(١٠٥) سورة الفيل مكية
وآياتها خمس

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

ألم تر كيف فعل ربك بأصحب الفيل ﴿١﴾ ألم يجعل كيدهم
في تضليل ﴿٢﴾ وأرسل عليهم طيرا أبابيل ﴿٣﴾ ترميهم
بحجارة من سجيل ﴿٤﴾ فجعلهم كعصف مأكول ﴿٥﴾

6. Sūra 105 in the Egyptian Koran.

(105) Sūra of the Elephant. Meccan.

And its verses are five.

This contains several items of useful information. First there is the number of the Sūra; numbering the Sūras is a Western habit recently adopted by Muslims, who in general refer to Sūras by name, not number. Second comes the name. The practice of naming Sūras is old, but it is human, not divine. One way of naming a Sūra is from its opening. Leaving aside the invocation ‘In the name of God, the

Merciful, the Compassionate', which precedes or opens all Sūras but one, our Sūra begins with the verse:

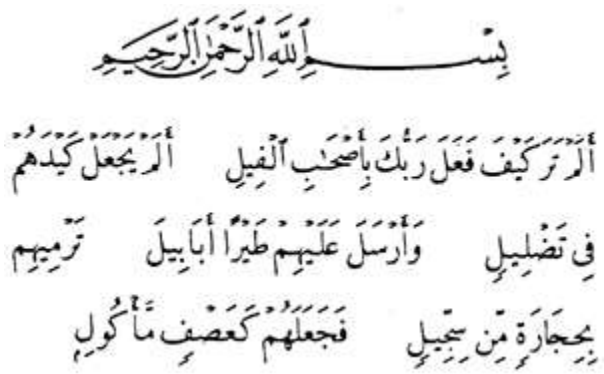
> 'Hast thou not seen (*a-lam tara*) how thy Lord did with the Men of the Elephant (*al-fīl*)? (Q105:1)

So it could be called 'The Sūra of "Hast thou not seen"' (*Sūrat a-lam tara*); this is how the famous commentator and historian Tabarī (d. 923) referred to it. The alternative is to name the Sūra by a catchword – some distinctive or unusual word or name that occurs somewhere in it. In this case, the reference to the elephant leaps to the eye, so we could speak of 'The Sūra of the Elephant' (*Sūrat al-fīl*). This name, unlike the one Tabarī used, is now standard usage, though one purist would wish us to speak rather of 'The Sūra in which the elephant is mentioned'. The third item, 'Meccan', tells us that the Sūra was revealed while Muḥammad was still in Mecca, before he moved to Medina in 622. The last item is the number of verses. Of these four items, Dānī tells us that there was no objection to including the second and fourth; he makes no mention of the others.

The last item leads us to yet another human intervention. The reader can verify that there are indeed five verses in the Sūra (we leave aside the initial invocation) thanks to the fact that each verse is followed by a rosette, and each rosette contains the number of that verse. The division of the text into verses is very old, and the subject of occasional disagreement (though not with regard to this

Sūra). Marking the division after each verse is also a traditional practice. Numbering the verses, though it has occasional precedent, is really a habit adopted from the West; by now it is more or less standard in the Muslim world.

Let us now strip out all this material. We confront Fig. 7. All the words are now God's (including in some sense the initial invocation); but we are still some way from naked scripture. What we have here is in fact a combination of God's words with a variety of human aids to their correct reading. To understand what this is about, we need spend a moment on the nature of the Arabic script. The Koran is tied to this script as closely as it is to the Arabic language. Not all sacred texts are so wedded to a particular script: Jews (unlike Samaritans) write their Bible in what is actually the Aramaic script, while the Pāli canon of Theravāda Buddhism is printed in the national script of the country concerned – the Thai script in Thailand, and so forth.



7. Sūra 105 in the Egyptian Koran (black, red, and yellow).

The Arabic script, like our own, derives ultimately from that of the Phoenicians. Their alphabet was as well developed in its representation of consonants as it was defective in marking vowels. A major innovation introduced by the Greeks when they borrowed this script was to devise ways of representing vowels on a par with consonants; it is thanks to them that you are now reading a fully vocalized script, as opposed to a purely consonantal (cnsnntl) one. By contrast, the offshoots of the Phoenician script used to write Semitic languages tended to be relatively conservative. Arabic at the time of the rise of Islam had no way of marking short vowels, and only ambiguous ways of marking long ones. Thus the word for 'elephant' is regularly written *fyl*, which invites the correct reading *fīl* (*fiyl*), but also erroneous ones such as *fayl*; there is a similarly ambiguous convention using *w* for *ū*. For the long *ā* they used a letter which properly represented the glottal stop (see the 'Note on Arabic'), and which now became ambiguous; but they did this rather haphazardly. In one respect, moreover, even the marking of consonants was inherently ambiguous: you could not tell whether a consonant was single or double.

To render the script unambiguous required a more radical departure, though one which had precedents in the region. What could not be expressed in the consonantal script itself could be added above and below it. In the writing of Arabic, this system is normally used only as needed – to clarify an ambiguity, or to assist the reader with a rare word or an unfamiliar name. Vocalizing an

entire text is unusual, but it can be done; it is regularly done today for the Koran, and has been for a good many centuries.

To see how this works, let us look again at the first verse of Sūra 105, which we can transcribe as follows:

> *ʾa-lam tara kayfa faʿala rabbuka bi-aṣḥābi ʿl-fīli*
>
> [?-not you-see how did lord-your to-companions the-elephant]

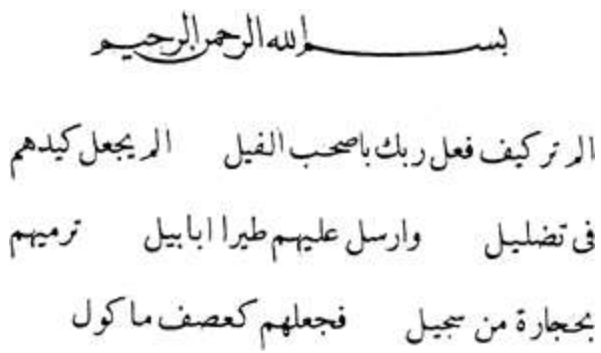
It so happens that the first ten vowels of the verse are short *as;* they are marked by the little slanting lines above the consonantal script. The same stretch also contains two little near-circles open to the left; these mark the *absence* of a vowel on the *m* of *a-lam* and the *y* of *kayfa*. The assiduous reader can also pick out the single instance of the sign for *u* (above the line) and the four instances of that for *i* (below the line). Finally, the short vertical stroke over the penultimate word marks the long *ā* in *bi-aṣḥābi*. So much for the vowels. Turning to the consonants, the sign which looks like the mirror image of a little numeral ‘2’ marks the glottal stop, while the rather indistinct sign at the beginning of the last word indicates its absence (my transcription fails to distinguish the two). The letter consisting of a single vertical stroke on which these markings sit is *alif*, the cousin of the Greek alpha and our ‘a’; it originally represented the glottal stop on its own, but as already mentioned it had become ambiguous. The little sign like a ‘w’ that appears about

the middle of the verse indicates the doubling of the *b* in *rabbuka*. Despite the fact that the points last mentioned concern consonants, we can loosely refer to all this as vocalization.

These conventions are obviously useful, but are we justified in adding such an apparatus to God's word? A prominent eighth-century scholar took the view that, while there could be no objection where short texts for school-children were concerned, it was not appropriate in the case of full codices; and the earliest manuscripts lack vocalization entirely. But mainstream opinion as formulated by Dānī was less conservative, though still sensitive to the problem: it was universally agreed that such vocalization was allowed, but it was not permissible to add it in black, since this was tantamount to altering the consonantal script itself. The proper thing was to use red and yellow (though Dānī was also prepared to countenance green in one instance). Yellow was for the sign marking the glottal stop, and red for the rest. The particular colour-code recommended by Dānī was not applied universally, but it is well represented in manuscripts from a cache preserved in Qayrawān in modern Tunisia.

Strip this away, and we are left with Fig. 8. Here there are still a few dots above and below the line. These are rightly written in black, and arise from a different aspect of the history of the Arabic script. In the Phoenician alphabet each letter was written separately, just as in printed English, and this remains the case with Hebrew in its printed form. But Arabic has evolved a cursive style which must be

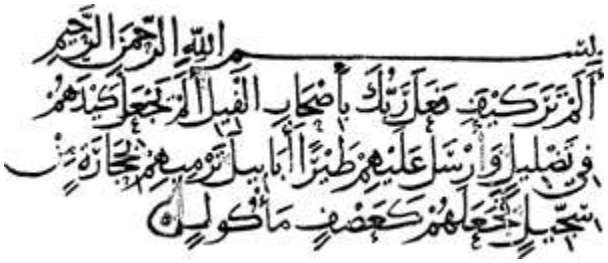
implemented even in print. The benefit of such a style is that writing becomes more fluent; the cost is that letters written cursively are likely to lose much of their shape, with the result that originally distinct letters can become indistinguishable. The dots are there to remedy this. Thus the single dot above the line in the last word of the verse marks an *f*; two dots would have made it a *q*. The next letter consists merely of a 'tooth' and two dots below, making it a *y*; one dot below would make it a *b*, two above would make it a *t*, and so forth. These diacritics, as they are called, made their appearance very early in the Islamic period, but for a long time their use was sporadic, even in Koran manuscripts. Nonetheless they are part of the black, not the red, and we will therefore forbear to remove them.



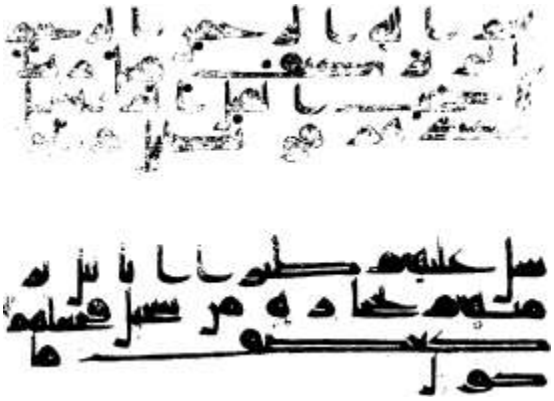
8. Sūra 105 in the Egyptian Koran (black only).

Like any script, Arabic writing is subject to changes of style which can strongly affect its appearance. The form of the script used in Fig. 6 would have seemed outlandish in the first century of Islam, and quite inappropriate for a copy of the Koran. Even into the ninth

century its rounded forms would still have seemed an odd choice, though by then the script was in wide use for other purposes. An outstanding Koran in this style was copied in Baghdad in 1000 or 1001; the copyist was the illustrious calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwāb. (Calligraphy was an enormously prestigious art in Islamic culture, just as it was in traditional China.) Figure 9 shows Sūra 105 in this Koran (the Sūra is announced in gold, but I have not tried to reproduce this). A comparison with Fig. 6 will show that we are looking at essentially the same form of script in both; palaeographers call it ‘Naskhī’.



9. Sūra 105 in Ibn al-Bawwāb’s Koran.



10. Sūra 105 from a fragment of a Koran in Kūfic script. The Sūra occupies the last lines on the front of a leaf (*above*) and the first lines on the other side (*below*). Whereas the front of the leaf is badly worn, the back is as good as new. Probably second half of the ninth century.

In the first three centuries of Islam, by contrast, the Koran was usually written in angular scripts of which the best known is referred to by specialists as 'Kūfic' (though they make a point of explaining that this is a misnomer). This script is illustrated in Fig. 10. The appearance is sharply different from Naskhī, enough to make it barely legible to the untrained eye. Though Kūfic went out of regular use in the central Islamic world, it retained its hold further west, and a descendant of it has continued to be in favour in North Africa down to modern times. Figure 11 shows Sūra 105 as it appears in a Koran copied for the Sultan of Morocco in 1568. An Arabist instantly recognizes this as 'Maghribī' script. In substance it diverges from Naskhī in one tiny point: following an old tradition, the *f* (as in *al-fīl* at the end of the first verse) has its dot underneath it, not above it (in this tradition, a dot above the letter would mark it as a *q*). Otherwise the only real differences are stylistic.

11. Sūra 105 in a Moroccan Koran. The heading is in gold, the text in black, and the vocalization in red, yellow, and green. Again, there is a page break in the middle of the Sūra. British Library, Ms. Or. 1405, ff. 395b–396a.

Variant readings

A scholastic culture which places a high value on fidelity in transmission may have to come to terms with a heritage of divergent textual traditions. For example, each of the Vedas is transmitted in more than one recension; the differences may be minimal, but they may also be very considerable. In the case of the Koran, Muslim scholarship was concerned with two broadly distinct kinds of variation. The first, and most fundamental, consisted of variants to the black. These are mostly ascribed to versions of the Koran in circulation before the creation of the authoritative text around 650 (though a few reflect small divergences between different regional transmissions of the standard version); these variants will not concern us in this chapter. The second type of

variation involved differences in the red and yellow, and it is these which we will glance at here.

In the early centuries of Islam, there were numerous divergent traditions of recitation of the Koran which differed from one another in small ways. Which one you learnt depended on whom you studied with. One eleventh-century scholar traversed the Islamic world from Morocco to Central Asia, and put together an account of fifty different traditions of recitation which he had received from 365 teachers through 1,459 different lines of transmission. But already in the tenth century Ibn Mujāhid (d. 936), a Koranic expert active in Baghdad, had brought some order into the field by picking out seven leading traditions. He collated their readings in a book which we still possess. Ibn Mujāhid's views on the Koranic text were open to challenge – as one critic acidly remarked, they had not been sent down by God from heaven – but his selection nevertheless acquired a kind of canonical status. (This did not, however, prevent him or anyone else from preserving a good deal of information about other traditions.) Each of the seven traditions selected by Ibn Mujāhid was that of a prominent reciter of the eighth century. Three of these reciters were from the city of Kūfa near Baghdad; Mecca, Medina, Baṣra, and Damascus were represented by one each. A given tradition might be further divided into sub-traditions through variant transmissions from the reciter's pupils. There came to be a doctrine that all seven traditions had been revealed to the Prophet,

though there was a Shī‘ite view that they were simply the fault of the transmitters.

As it happens, there are no differences between the seven reciters with regard to the reading of Sūra 105. There are, however, two points of disagreement between them in the passage on the Sabbath-breakers (Q7:163–6) which we examined earlier, and one of these will serve as an illustration (we will come to the other later). If we were to venture beyond the ranks of the seven, we could find many more variants for the passage (and even some for Sūra 105); but that would be too much of a good thing.

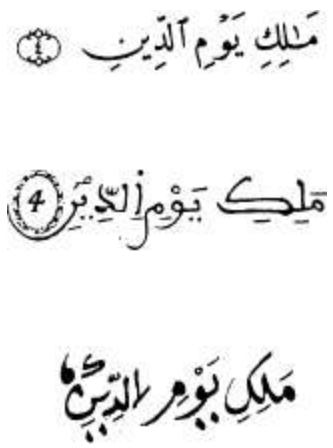
The variant concerns the word translated ‘as an excuse’. Six of the seven read *ma‘dhiratun* (in the nominative case; the final *n* is the indefinite article, and is always written as part of the vocalization). The seventh agreed with them according to one transmission, but read *ma‘dhiratan* (in the accusative) according to others. This does not make much difference to the meaning. On the first reading, we would understand ‘[Our admonishing them is] an excuse . . .’; whereas on the second the meaning would be as in our translation, namely ‘[We admonished them] as an excuse . . .’. This is not the kind of divergence that is of great concern to any but a scholar who, like Dānī, is interested in textual variants. Yet as will be seen, it is in one way instructive.

Although the religious geography of the traditional Islamic world is by no means a closed book to us, we are still surprisingly ill

informed about the history of the divergent traditions of Koranic recitation. We know that they were numerous in the early centuries, and we know that in our time a single tradition is dominant. But our picture of the intervening development is sketchy. As a mid-point, we are fortunate in having some remarks of Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 1429) on the situation in his own day; a Damascene scholar, he was both well travelled and an expert on the text of the Koran. As might be expected, he remarks on the massive extinctions that had already taken place among the old traditions. More surprising is his description of the tradition of the Baṣran Abū'Amr ibn al-'Alā' (d. 770 or 771) as dominant in Syria, the Ḥijāz, Yemen, and Egypt (he notes that it had been brought to Damascus from Iraq, displacing the original tradition of Syria there around 1100). In our time, this tradition survives only in the region of the Sudan (where it is said to extend to northern Eritrea and eastern Chad). In the centre of the Islamic world it has been replaced by that of 'Āṣim (d. 745) – a tradition which, ironically, Ibn Mujāhid had described as rather unsuccessful in its home city of Kūfa. It perhaps owed its remarkable ascent to association with the Turks, who came to rule large parts of the Islamic world from the eleventh century onwards.

Today, the sub-tradition 'Ḥafṣ from 'Āṣim' is in effect the standard text of the Koran: when scripture is quoted without further specification, it can be assumed to be in this version. The results are occasionally arresting. 'Āṣim is the only reciter who read *ma'dhiratan* in Q7:164, and even he is also said to have read

ma‘dhiratun with the mainstream; yet it is this isolated reading that lies behind our translation ‘As an excuse’. Two other traditions are alive today in northern Africa. One is that of



12. The text of Q1:4 in three Korans. The first line shows the verse as it appears in a standard Egyptian Koran: the long *ā* required by the reading of Ḥafṣ from ‘Āṣim is marked with a small vertical *alif* written in just above the line. The second line shows the verse as found in a Koran printed in Tunisia in 1969: the *a* is short, as required by the reading of Warsh from Nāfi‘. The *a* is likewise short in the third line, which follows the reading of Abū ‘Amr. This is taken from a Sudanese Koran copied in the Hijrī year 1299 (1881 or 1882) which found its way to Leeds as part of the spoils of the British conquest of the Sudan in 1898–9 (Leeds University Ms. 619).

Abū ‘Amr, as already mentioned. The other is that of the Medinese Nāfi‘ (d. 785 or 786), which survives much more extensively in two sub-traditions, one centred on Libya, and the other extending

further to the west; it was already well established in this region of the Islamic world long before Ibn al-Jazarī's day. It also holds out in the highlands of Yemen.

The Fātiḥa, which as we will see is repeated as often as Muslims pray, describes God as 'the Master of the Day of Judgment' (*māliki yawmi' ldīn*, Q1:4). The word rendered 'master' is *māliki*, and this was the reading of 'Āṣim and one other of the seven. The majority, however, read *maliki*, which means 'king', and Ṭabarī for one judged it to be the better reading; it is still recited by those who follow Abū 'Amr and Nāfi'. As usual, this does not reflect any disagreement regarding the black, which is simply *mlk* in either case; in correct Koranic orthography, only the red can tell the two readings apart (see Fig. 12). It is, incidentally, possible to mark variant readings in the same codex by deploying a riot of colour, and we have examples of this from Qayrawān; but Dānī disapproved of the practice as likely to lead to terrible confusion.

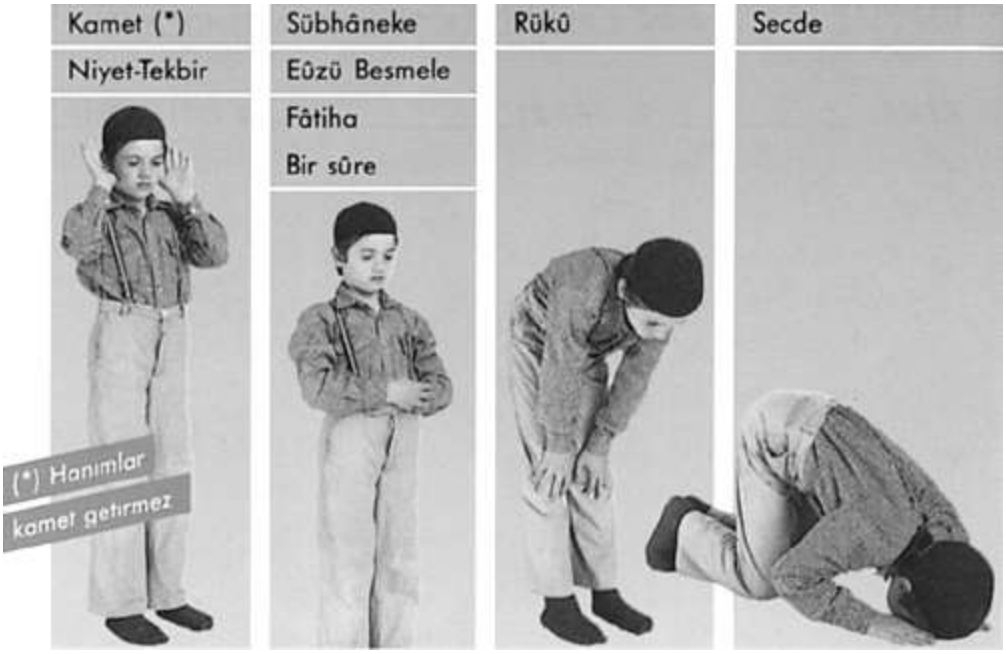
Chapter 8
The Koran as worship

The liturgical and semi-liturgical role of the Koran

Given that the Koran is God's book, it is natural that it should play a significant role in Muslim worship. The surprise is that it does not do so as a written text. The Muslim worshipper does not *read* the Koran, but rather *recites* it. Reading the Koran from a codex in the course of worship is a practice mentioned by some old Muslim authorities, but they do so only to disparage it: it reminds them of Jewish ritual. This goes with the strong emphasis which the culture places on learning the Koran by heart. A ninth-century scholar of Qayrawān held that the schoolteacher was entitled to his remuneration if the boy could read correctly from the written text, even though he did not know it by heart; few boys, he observed, get the Koran by heart the first time. But it was far better to be able to recite the entire text from memory.

The core of the Muslim liturgy is the five obligatory daily prayers, whether performed alone or in congregation. Each prayer is made up of between two and four repetitions of a module called the *rak'a*. Each *rak'a* combines a series of liturgical formulae with a succession of physical movements: the worshipper begins the *rak'a* in a

standing posture, then bows, kneels, and prostrates twice. For purposes of illustration we can confine ourselves to the standing phase of the first *rak'a* of the prayer (see Fig. 13). This involves an obligatory Koranic recitation, characteristically in two parts. First, the worshipper must recite the Fātiḥa. Second, he or she should recite some further portion of the Koran. Within limits, the worshipper is free to choose this passage. Nothing very substantial is called for – God tells the believers only to 'recite of it so much as is feasible' (Q73:20). The following would be appropriate:



13. How to pray. Instructions for performing the first *rak'a* of the dawn prayer, taken from a Turkish pamphlet prepared by the Muftī of the Eminönü quarter in the old city of Istanbul. The pamphlet is for anyone who does not know how to pray, but is intended particularly for children. The illustrations in

this pamphlet show both a boy and a girl at prayer, but the raising of the hands in the first position shown here (thumbs level with the earlobes) is for males only. Above the second position, the second and third items give the Koranic recitation that goes with this *rak'a*: the Fātiḥa and one Sūra. At the end of the pamphlet several short Sūras are set out, including Sūra 105, together with some shorter passages from longer Sūras, including the 'throne verse' (Q2:255). For each the Muftī gives the original Arabic accompanied by a simple Turkish transcription and a Turkish translation.

> Say: 'He is God, One, God, the Everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, and has not been begotten, and equal to Him is not anyone.' (Q112)

This satisfies those who stipulate a minimum of three short verses; equally it meets the criterion of those who require a complete Sūra. It is also a passage with a prime doctrinal message: it proclaims the unity of God, implicitly putting in their place those who say He has a son. We need not go on to the details of the role of Koranic recitation in other prayers, obligatory and supererogatory. Overall, it is worth noticing that the Koran, while essential to the Muslim liturgy, is only recited to a rather limited extent here.

Outside the ritual of prayer, the recitation of the Koran can play a part in a remarkably wide, not to say open-ended, variety of activities which we can loosely describe as semi-liturgical. The

contexts range from the narrowly religious to the broadly social, and the reciter is likely to cover a substantial part of the text, or even all of it. At one end of the spectrum, early texts tell of Muslims who would recite the entire Koran at regular intervals; some did it every three days, some as often as every day. At the other end of the spectrum, Lane, in his account of Egypt in the early decades of the nineteenth century, remarks that a recital of the entire Koran is 'the most prevalent mode of entertaining a party of guests among the higher and middle ranks' in Cairo. Such a performance might last about nine hours, though the guests would not need to be present all of the time. Nor would this marathon be the work of a single man: three or four trained reciters might take turns. The salience of Koranic recitation in the everyday life of Egypt was no less striking, and in some respects more so, in the middle of the twentieth century. Jomier describes the way in which ordinary believers would silently move their lips while reciting the scripture on trams.

Beyond this, the Koran is present in everyday life in ways that are not liturgical at all. Thus Jomier gives examples of the recourse Egyptians would have to the scripture in times of personal crisis, such as an illness in the family. A man whose son had measles would frequently go to the child's sickbed to recite passages from the Koran; one of them, already familiar to us, was the 'throne verse'. This verse, as Sale put it, is 'sublime and magnificent'; it is also powerful, and this power is the key to its use on this and many other occasions. In short, we see here a degree of scriptural

saturation of daily life which it is hard for most inhabitants of the Western world to imagine, and which the rise of fundamentalism has in general only served to enhance.

Here are three Koranic phrases which illustrate the penetration of scripture into everyday language.

'If God wills!' (*in shā' Allāh*, as in Q2:70). This expresses deference to God's omnipotence with regard to the future: 'I'll be leaving on Thursday, God willing.'

'God knows best!' (*Allāhu a'lam*, as in Q3:167). This expresses deference to God's omniscience with regard to the past: 'God alone knows how it got that way.' (The traditional Muslim scholars made frequent use of this phrase to express reservation: 'Some say it happened this way, some say it happened that way, and God knows best.')

'Praise be to God!' (*al-hamdu lillāh*, as in the Fātiḥa): This acknowledges that all the credit for what happens goes to God. It could mean 'Well, thank God for that!' It is also a sufficient response to the question 'How are you?' (A traditional copyist, on reaching the end of the book he was copying, would write: 'The book is finished, praise be to God!')

One thing that marks these phrases as quotations is that linguistically they are alien to colloquial Arabic, which would

not use the verb *shā'* to mean 'will', nor add a final *-u* to *al-hamd* or *Allāh*.

Even outside the context of prayer, there is more than an element of ritual to the recitation of the Koran. As with touching the codex, there are questions of purity to be faced before reciting the text. Here, however, the answers tend to be more accommodating; the view that only the ritually pure could recite the Koran was disparagingly associated with Musaylima, a false prophet contemporary with Muḥammad. (Of course if you are reading from a codex in a state of ritual impurity, someone else should turn the pages.) Ritual purity is even less of a precondition for listening to Koranic recitation. Even unbelievers with whom the Muslims are in a state of war may ask to hear it (Q9:6) – contrast the restrictive attitude of the Brahmins with regard to the recitation of the Vedas. Turning to the ritual elements in the actual performance, the reciter should begin with the words 'I take refuge in God from the accursed Satan', since this is specified in Q16:98; there is likewise a closing formula, 'Almighty God has spoken truly'. In the course of the recitation, there may be points where the reciter, and perhaps also the listener, should prostrate themselves. An example is the following:

> Only those believe in Our signs who, when they are reminded of them, *fall down prostrate* and proclaim the praise of their Lord, not waxing proud. (Q32:15)

In a standard text, the words italicized here will be overlined, and the word ‘prostration’ written prominently in the margin. The sharp-witted reader will have seen the subtle problems this can give rise to. What if a worshipper selects such a verse to recite during the standing phase of the ritual prayer? Should a schoolteacher and his pupil prostrate themselves when they read or recite a verse of this kind in the course of instruction? And what if one hears one in a recording of Koran recitation (a question raised as early as 1899)?

How the Koran is recited

Any reader who has visited an Islamic country and ventured beyond the Holiday Inn will know that Koranic recitation does not sound in the least like the reading of the Bible in, say, a Presbyterian Church. All that is expected there is a careful and measured version of a normal speaking voice. The Koran, by contrast, is chanted. In comparative perspective, there is nothing unusual about this. The Hebrew Bible and the Vedas are chanted. The Buddha told his followers not to chant their scriptures in Vedic style, but they chant them nonetheless. Indeed, *not* chanting one’s canonical texts is perhaps to be seen as an eccentricity of Protestant Christianity.

From the point of view of the Muslim scholars, for whom Koranic recitation was a virtue and music a vice, this involved – and continues to involve – a delicate exercise in line-drawing. From the early Islamic period onwards, we encounter repeated denunciations of the musical recitation of the Koran, combined with occasional

voices raised in its favour. The technical term for this is ‘recitation with notes’; Bīrūnī, an eleventh-century Muslim scholar who was also the world’s first Indologist, uses this term in describing Vedic recitation. How far this abhorred practice eventually disappeared in Islam, and how far it is none other than the melodious style of recitation we know today, is not easy to say. We have an abundance of medieval manuscripts, but no medieval recordings. However, we learn something from the following dialogue between Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855) and an otherwise unknown questioner:

> Questioner: What’s your opinion of recitation with notes?
>
> Ibn Ḥanbal: What’s your name?
>
> Questioner: Muhammad.
>
> Ibn Hanbal: So how would you like people to call you ‘Mūḥammad’?

The objection here is to lengthening short vowels; this is not a feature of Koranic recitation today except in very restricted contexts. On the other hand, a later follower of Ibn Ḥanbal, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201), used to begin his emotional preaching sessions in Baghdad with highly orchestrated Koranic recitation. He would have twenty-odd reciters present; two or three of them would recite a verse in a quavering chant that brought yearning to the heart,

then another group would take up a second verse, and so on. The whole performance had clearly been planned in detail with an eye to maximizing the emotional impact on the audience. All that was missing was an orchestra.

There were already different styles of recitation in the early centuries of Islam. For example, Ibn Ḥanbal had a particular dislike for the tradition associated with Ḥamza (d. about 773), a Kūfan reciter who was later to be included among Ibn Mujāhid's seven: 'all *īh* and *āh*', as he put it (rather cryptically for us). Others took exception to the ear-splitting, button-popping glottal stops associated with this tradition. Today too tastes differ, but the unquestionable metropolis of the art of Koranic recitation is Egypt – ironically, a land to which Ibn Mujāhid had not bothered to accord a representative when he selected his seven. It is mainly to contemporary Egyptian styles of recitation that the following remarks relate.

There are two components to the tradition of Koranic recitation. The first is primarily phonetic and rule-bound; the second is, in our terms, musical, and it is not prescribed by the rules except in so far as these discourage the reciter from going too far. It is best to take the two components separately.

We have already encountered Sūra 112 as one commonly used in the ritual prayer. Here it is in Arabic:

qul huwa ʻllāhu aḥad

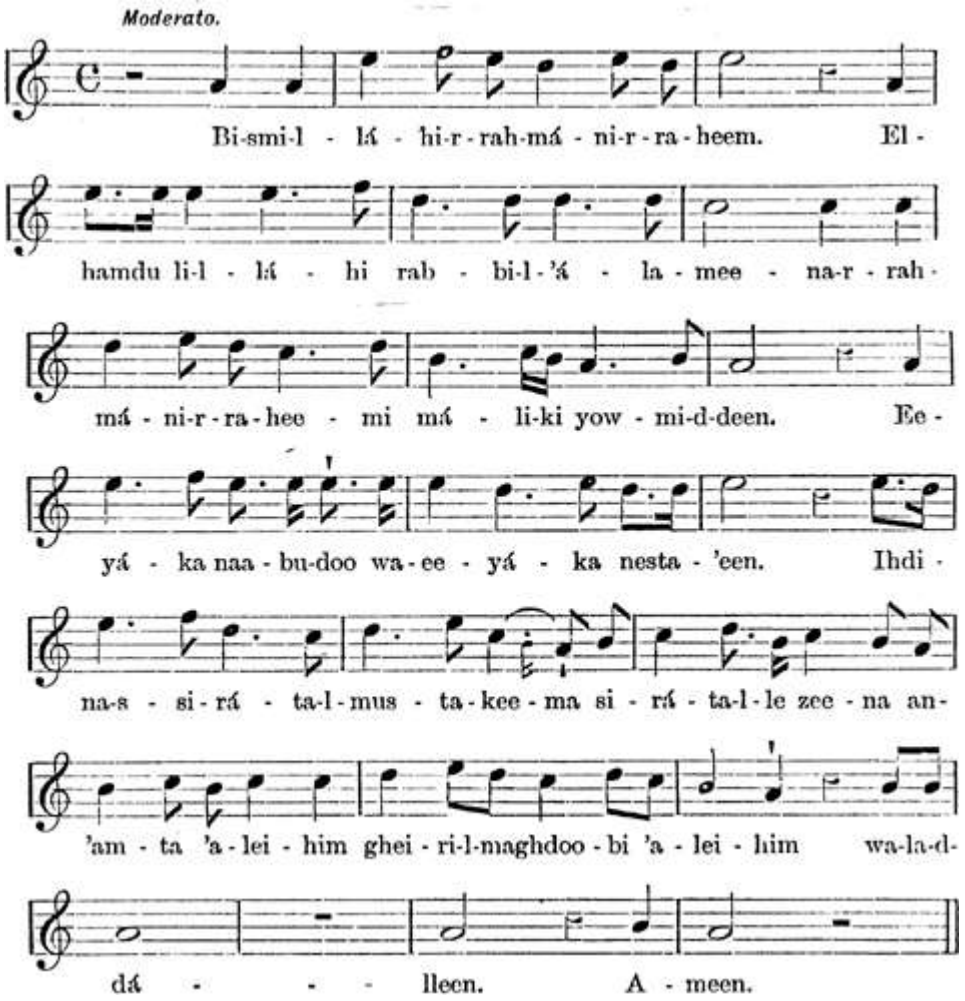
allāhu ʻl-ṣamad

lam yalid wa-lam yūlad

wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan ahad

This transcription follows the norms of formal literary Arabic, but in two respects it fails to show how a reciter would render the text. One is that certain consonants, including *d*, must be followed by a short, colourless vowel when they come at the end of a syllable. If we use an *e* to mark this, we can say that the reciter must pronounce *yalid* as *yalid-e*, and similarly for the last word of each verse. (The same thing happens inside words, but as it happens there is no example in this Sūra.) The other phonetic effect that does not appear in my transcription is a matter of junction. In Arabic, as in any language, when two words are put together, the last sound of the first may interact with the first sound of the second: in standard English speech, the ‘n’ in ‘we can do’ comes out rather differently from the ‘n’ in ‘we can come’. What is unusual about Koranic recitation is that it has rules of junction not found in standard pronunciations of Arabic. There is only one instance of this in Sūra 112, but it is quite striking: *yakun lahu* must be recited *yakul lahu*. A further reason why Ibn Ḥanbal detested recitation in the tradition of Ḥamza had to do with these junction effects, though we do not

know exactly what it was he objected to. As already mentioned, this whole phonetic aspect of recitation is rule-bound, and it has been for a very long time; there is a book about such rules by Dānī, who felt they were being neglected in his day.

What Dānī does not tell us about, and perhaps cannot, is the musical aspect of the recitation whose phonetics he prescribes at length. (For convenience I shall use the word ‘musical’, but were this book to be translated into Arabic, the term would have to be edited out. ‘We just can’t have the word “musical” here’, as a member of an Egyptian committee for assessing Koran reciters remarked around 1977: ‘use any of the others to avoid the problem, so that this word isn’t applied to the Koran.’) There was no tradition of musical notation of Koranic recitation in Dānī’s culture. Thus Fig. 14, which shows the Fātiḥa as recorded by Lane, must be among the earliest such documents we possess. I trust it will convey something to those who (unlike myself) are able to read music. In any case, recordings of Koranic recitation are easily available today in most parts of the world where Muslims live.

Moderato.
Bi-smi-l - lá - hi-r-rah-má - ni-r-ra-heem. El -
hamdu li-l - lá - hi rab - bi-l-'á - la-mee - na-r-rah -
má - ni-r-ra-hee - mi má - li-ki yow - mi-d-deen. Ee -
yá - ka naa - bu-doo wa-ee - yá - ka nesta - 'een. Ihdi -
na-s - si-rá - ta-l-mus - ta-kee-ma si - rá - ta-l-le zee - na an -
'am - ta 'a-lei - him ghei - ri-l-maghdoo - bi 'a - lei - him wa-la-d -
dá - - - lleen. A - meen.

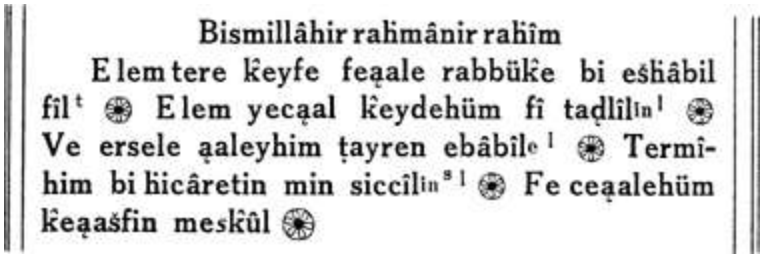
14. A musical notation of the Fātiḥa. The notation is Lane's. The reciter ends by adding an *āmīn* ('amen'), which rhymes nicely with *dāllīn*. From Edward Lane, *An account of the manners and customs of the modern Egyptians written in Egypt during the years 1833–1835*, London 1895, pp. 382–3.

Cultures which chant their canonical texts have a natural tendency to develop at least two kinds of chanting. On the one hand, there will be a rather plain style in which the role of melody is limited; this is the appropriate style when the purpose is to articulate the

text in a clear and comprehensible fashion. And, on the other hand, there will be a musically more complex style, with elaborate use of melody; this is intended to appeal strongly to the musical sensibilities and religious emotions of the audience. Thus in Gregorian chant, which continues a Jewish liturgical tradition, a plain style is used for normal liturgical readings from the Bible, whereas the Psalms are taken as an invitation to musical virtuosity.

The Koranic equivalents are known as *tartīl* and *tajwīd*. The former is used in the strictly liturgical context of prayer, and in religious instruction. The latter is characteristic of the performances of professional Koran reciters. This style requires much greater musical skill on the part of the performer (it is no accident that Umm Kulthūm (d. 1975), perhaps the most famous Egyptian singer of the twentieth century, also had experience as a Koran reciter). It also offers much greater aesthetic and emotional rewards to the audience. It is not unseemly to weep silently during a particularly moving recitation, and even a fairly quiet audience will often cry out 'Allāh! Allāh!' when the reciter pauses between phrases. Much of the intensity that gives the art of Koranic recitation its effectiveness comes from a union of grave and dignified restraint with a kind of playing with fire. A really successful Koran reciter in modern Egypt has a better sense than Ibn Ḥanbal would have wished of what it might be like to be a rock star. (Likewise a rather sour Dutch observer of Meccan society in the 1880s compared the reciters he encountered there to 'our opera singers', and remarked

that they were ‘as vain, jealous and capricious as artists are in Europe’.) An inferior reciter gets short shrift: ‘Like a street vendor selling tomatoes!’


Bismillâhir rahmânir rahîm
Elem tere keyfe feaale rabbüke bi eshâbil fîl ۞ Elem yecaal keydehüm fî tadlîl ۞ Ve ersele aaleyhim tayren ebâbîl ۞ Termîhim bi hicâretin min siccîl ۞ Fe ceaalehüm keaasfin meskûl ۞

15. Sūra 105 in a Turkish transcription. *Elkur’an*, Istanbul 1932, p. 453.

An interesting but more prosaic aspect of Koranic recitation which we know little or nothing about in the pre-modern world is the degree of phonetic assimilation of the text to the local vernacular. At the present day, such effects are present, though subject to erosion through the power of modern technology and the prestige of the Arab world, particularly of Egypt. Thus Fig. 15 reproduces Sūra 105 as it appears in a Koran in Latin script published in Turkey in 1932 (this was four years after the Latin script was officially adopted for writing Turkish). The most striking features of this transcription concern the vowels: in many contexts the short *a* of Arabic has become ‘e’, and the short *u* shows a similar tendency to develop into ‘ü’, a sound like the French ‘u’. By contrast, none of this can be heard on a cassette I bought in Istanbul in 1994, for all that the name of

the reciter is typically Turkish. In any case, there is nothing in the Islamic world to compare with the situation in East Asia, where the traditional readings of a Confucian classic by speakers of Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, and Japanese would be mutually unintelligible.

Just as there are no formal rules for the musical aspect of recitation, so also there is no formal instruction. One much admired performer who came from a family of Koran reciters was trained by his father, who then took him to study for three years with a famous musician (he was also the teacher of Umm Kulthūm). This lack of codification goes hand in hand with the central role of improvisation in high-class recitation. Shaykh Muṣṭafā Ismāʿīl (d. 1978) described a performance of his in Alexandria where he delighted the audience with a particularly effective cadence: 'everyone went wild and asked for it again, but I could never do it again.' His performance was spontaneous, and once the moment had passed, he no longer knew what he had done.

Translating the Koran

The original languages of the Christian Bible were Hebrew for the Old Testament (with a bit of Aramaic thrown in) and Greek for the New Testament (unless some of it was originally in Aramaic). But for most Christians during most of their history, the language of the Bible, whether or not it was their own, was something other than the original languages. For Muslims matters have been very

different. Arabic is not just the *original* language of the Koran: it *is* the language of the Koran. Translating scripture was thus an issue for Muslims in a way that it was not for Christians. What was at stake was not whether it was permissible to render the sense of the Koran into another language; obviously this could be done, though the result was naturally imperfect and subject to human error. The issue was the use to which such a translation might be put.

If the object was to help people whose native language was not Arabic to understand the original, there could hardly be a problem. Thus there exists a whole genre of Persian translations of the Koran, the oldest of which go back to the tenth or eleventh century. One very characteristic form taken by these texts can be seen from Fig. 16, which is taken from a recent reproduction of an older lithograph Koran, dating no doubt from the nineteenth century. Here the Arabic text appears in a large, bold Naskhī script; beneath it, in a small and typically Persian hand, is a humble word-by-word Persian translation borrowed from an old Persian Koran commentary. The hegemony of the Arabic original is visually unmistakable in this setting, and the Arabic word order overrides the normal syntactic patterns of Persian (the verbs come early in the verses instead of at the end). The slavishness of this translation has many parallels in other cultures. The fourth-century Gothic translation of the Bible is painfully literal, and Tibetan translations of Buddhist scriptures adhere so closely to the original texts that they can be used with confidence to reconstruct them.

سورة الفيل مكية وهي خمس آيات ١٠٥
بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
بنام خداوند بخشنده مهربان
الم تر كيف فعل ربك بأصحاب الفيل ① الم يجعل كيدهم
آيا نديدى كه چگونه كرد پروردگار تو ببياران فيل آيا نگردانيد حيلهٔ ايشان را
في تضليل ② وأرسل عليهم طيرا أبابيل ③ ترميهم بحجارة
در گمراهى و فرستاد برايشان مرغان را گروه گروه ابابيل كه ميانداخت آنها را
من سجيل ④ فجعلهم كعصف مأكول ⑤
بسنگ از گل پس گردانيد آنها را مانند گاه خورده شده

16. Sūra 105 with interlinear Persian translation. The format is similar to that of the Lindisfarne Gospels, except that there the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon translation was added *above* the line.

A somewhat bolder format is found in translations published in Iran today, as can be seen from Fig. 17. This shows Sūra 105 with the translation of the distinguished Āyatullāh Nāṣir Makārim Shīrāzī. Here the Arabic and Persian appear on opposite pages. The primacy of the Arabic is nevertheless clearly marked. It appears on the right, while the print-size of the Persian on the left is suitably modest. The one, as the Āyatullāh remarks, is the word of God, the other is merely that of a created being. Yet this time the translation itself is far from being a slavish one. Persian syntax is firmly in the saddle (the verbs have moved to the ends of the verses). At the same time

the handling of the meaning is noticeably more assertive. The old literal translation renders our ‘men of the elephant’ quite literally as ‘the companions of the elephant’; this leaves entirely open the question of how exactly they relate to the animal that serves to identify them. The Āyatullāh, by contrast, has decided to put them on top of it, and renders ‘the elephant-riders’. This manner of translating is in line with that adopted by John Wycliffe (d. 1384) in his English translation of the Latin Bible; his view was that one should ‘translate aftir the sentence, and not oneli aftir the wordis’. Yet it would still be going too far to see the Āyatullāh as a Persian Luther. Luther’s idea was to Germanize Moses by eliminating his Hebraisms to such an extent that no one would think of calling him a Hebrew; no right-thinking Muslim would entertain so tart a notion of stripping God of his Arabisms.

سورهٔ فیل

این سوره در مکّه نازل شده و دارای ۵ آیه است

به نام خداوند بخشندهٔ مهربان

۱ آیا ندیدی پروردگارت با فیل سواران [= لشکر ابرهه که برای نابودی کعبه آمده بودند] چه کرد؟!
۲ آیا نقشهٔ آنها را در ضلالت و تباهی قرار نداد؟!
۳ و بر سر آنها پرندگانی را گروه گروه فرستاد،
۴ که با سنگهای کوچکی آنان را هدف قرار می دادند؛
۵ سرانجام آنها را همچون کاه خورده شده (و متلاشی) قرار داد!

17. Sūra 105 with facing Persian translation. Tehran and Qum, mid-1990s. This resembles the well-known fifth-century

Christian Codex Bezae, where the original Greek is provided with a facing Latin translation – with the significant difference that in Codex Bezae there is no disparity in size between the scripts.

For all its relative assertiveness, a translation such as Makārim Shīrāzī's is still clearly designed to help the reader with the Arabic text, and *not* as a substitute for it. In this sense it is quite unlike the English Bible, which substitutes for the Latin, which in turn substitutes for the Greek and Hebrew originals. As Ibn Taymiyya put it: 'One may not recite the Koran in any language other than Arabic, irrespective of whether one is able to recite it in Arabic or not.' Not surprisingly, there is not and has never been a *standard* Persian translation.

سُورَةُ الفِيلِ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ ﴿١﴾ أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ
فِي تَضْلِيلٍ ﴿٢﴾ وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ ﴿٣﴾ تَرْمِيهِم
بِحِجَارَةٍ مِّن سِجِّيلٍ ﴿٤﴾ فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَّأْكُولٍ ﴿٥﴾

Persian was the first non-Arabic language to become accredited, so to speak, in Islamic civilization. But others followed, and parallels to

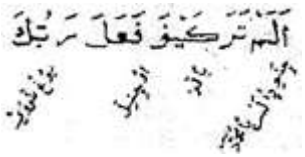
both the Persian formats described above are widespread. For example, there are interlinear translations into Turkish, Spanish, and Polish – all written in Arabic script. (To sample such Spanish and Polish versions, see Figs. 18 and 19; for an Afrikaans rendering in a different format, see Fig. 20.) As to facing-page translations, I am the proud possessor of a recent printing of the Koran with such a rendering into Chinese. An English translation appeared in this now common format in 1984, with the authorization of the Azhar. This august body made the adoption of the format a condition of its approval; in the absence of the Arabic original, it was feared that someone might mistakenly think that 'this translation is the Koran itself'. The Azharite wording is revealing: it would make no sense in a Christian context to speak of *mistaking* the King James Bible for 'the Bible itself'. Incidentally, the facing-translation format also has its oral equivalent. On the Turkish cassette mentioned above, after the reciter has chanted a passage in Arabic, a Turkish translation follows in a normal speaking voice; it requires no knowledge of either language to discern which of the two is God's word.

Yet the idea of a translation which would substitute for the original was not entirely unknown to early Islam, even in the core context of the five prayers. The Hanafīs, one of the four schools of legal thought in Sunnī Islam, acquired a strong following in the Persian-speaking world soon after their emergence. It is no accident that they alone among the schools of law developed the idea that it was permissible to recite the Koran in a non-Arabic language while

performing the ritual prayers. But this practice did not take root. We are told that in the Persian-speaking city of Merv, an early eleventh-century ruler once arranged a debate between the Ḥanafīs and their rivals the Shāfi'ites. The Shāfi'ites won because one of their leading scholars performed a merciless parody of Ḥanafī prayer. In the course of it he took advantage of every relevant legal loophole countenanced by Ḥanafī law. One of his finest touches in his brilliantly successful effort to make the Ḥanafīs look silly was to recite a short Koranic verse in Persian.

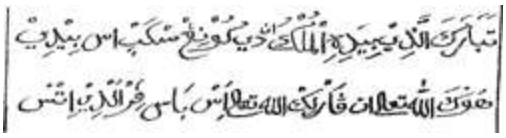
18. A Spanish translation of Q105:1–2. The Moriscos – Spanish Muslims under Christian rule – often wrote in 'Aljamiado', that is Spanish in Arabic script. Their religious literature included translations of the Koran. In the passage shown, the translation (written above the original, just as in the Lindisfarne Gospels)

reads: 'Y-¿-no-te fué fecho a saber como fiço tu-señor *yā Muḥammad* con-las-compañas *del-al-fīl*? Y-¿no-sabes que puso *Allāh* sus artes en-desyerror?' (Arabic words in italics). The dialect is Aragonese ('fecho' for 'hecho'). Our translator inserts *yā Muḥammad* (O Muḥammad!), and retains the Arabic *al-fīl,* whereas another version has 'elefante'. The word 'desyerror' (gross error) is unknown to modern Spanish, but common in Aljamiado. Though my transcription does not show this, Spanish 's' is consistently written as *sh.* The manuscript was part of a substantial collection walled up in a house in Almonacid de la Sierra, a village in Aragon. The collection was no doubt deposited there by its owner at the time of the expulsion of the Moriscos in 1610; it remained in its hiding place until it came to light in 1884.



19. From a Polish translation of Q105:1. One byproduct of the Mongol upheaval of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was the implantation of communities of Muslim Tatars in Lithuania (which then covered a much larger area than it does today). These Tatars soon forgot their native Turkic language, and instead came to speak the languages of their neighbours, and to use them in their religious literature. What you see here,

written underneath the Arabic original (just as in Fig. 16), is a Polish translation – written in a kind of Polish Aljamiado. It reads: 'Czy-nie-widziales *yā Muḥammad* jak˙e uczynil Bóg twój …' ('Have you not seen, O Muḥammad, how your God did …'). The manuscript dates from the early nineteenth century, but the translation is likely to be considerably older.



20. From an Afrikaans translation of Q67:1. In this format, there is no visual distinction between original and translation. The Arabic occupies the first half of the first line: 'Blessed be He in whose hand is the Kingdom.' The translation is loose, providing a paraphrase followed by an expansion (which anticipates the second half of the verse): 'En die koning skap is bydie hoege *Allāh ta' ālā,* en waarlik *Allāh ta' ālā* is baas vir al-die iets' ('And the kingship is with God the most-high, may He be exalted; and truly God, may He be exalted, is master of all things'). What strikes an English-speaker here is 'baas', from the same Dutch word as our 'boss'; what strikes an Afrikaans-speaker is the non-standard use of 'iets', as if the translator were saying 'all the somethings'. This text forms part of the religious literature of the Muslim community of nineteenth-century Cape Town, and was in the collection of the late Achmat Davids. It may date from the 1880s (several decades

before the Bible was translated into Afrikaans). This community arose from exiles and slaves brought to the Cape by the Dutch from the East Indies and elsewhere. The presence of such non-Dutch populations was essential to the process that turned Dutch into Afrikaans.

Some religions, like Buddhism, take to scriptural translation like ducks to water. The Buddha, we are told, 'can express everything he wishes in any language whatever', and not only that, he 'speaks them all at once'. But such linguistic indifference was not a feature of Islam. The Koran was destined to remain as it had been revealed:

> We have sent it down an Arabic Koran; haply you will understand. (Q12:2)

From this verse Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), a formidable scholar of Muslim Spain, drew the laconic inference 'Non-Arabic isn't Arabic, so it's not Koran.' Yet every cloud has a silver lining: if a translation of the scripture is not Koran, there need be no restrictions on touching it.

Chapter 9
The Koran as truth

It is possible for a text to be copied or recited as part of a religious heritage without anyone paying much attention to whatever message or messages it might contain. Vedānta, the school which has long dominated intellectual Hinduism, is a case in point: its veneration for the Vedas is unbounded, but it finds its message not in the Vedas proper, but in the later Upanisads. The Koran, by contrast, has suffered no such disconnection of its meaning. God's speech is not only sacred, it is also unfailingly true. The Koran is a book sent down 'to make everything clear' (Q16:89), a repertoire of truths which cry out for the attention of the believers.

These truths play a part in numerous aspects of Muslim literature and life, formal and informal. 'There are often met with in Egyptian society', wrote Lane with regard to the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet, 'persons who will introduce an apposite quotation . . . in common conversation, whatever be the topic; and an interruption of this kind is not considered, as it would be in general society in our own country, either hypocritical or annoying.' There is even a story in which a pilgrim encounters a woman who for thirty years has communicated *exclusively* in Koranic quotations. This, of course,

would be highly eccentric, but the kind of thing described by Lane was commonplace. One day in tenth-century Qayrawān, a distinguished local scholar listened with horror to a traveller's account of the sad state of Islam in Baghdad; his response ended with the words: 'Surely we belong to God, and to Him we return.' To see the force of this saying, we have to look at the Koranic passage from which it is taken:

> Yet give thou good tidings unto the patient who, when they are visited by an affliction, say, 'Surely we belong to God, and to Him we return.' (Q2:155–6)

An idiomatic English translation might thus be: 'What a catastrophe!' The more common use of the quotation then and now is to console someone on the death of a loved one. Another example of the apposite quotation comes from our Dutch observer of nineteenth-century Mecca. He relates that a 'daughter of Mecca' would parry the anger of an irate husband with a quotation from Q2:229 on divorce: 'then honourable retention or setting free kindly.' A loose English rendering might be: 'Either you divorce me or you don't.' He adds with some sarcasm that, the Fātiḥa apart, these were the only words of the Koran which every Meccan woman knew.

Koranic references can be used with considerable levity. Ibn Wāra (d. 884) was an able young scholar from Ray in northern

Iran, but his insufferable arrogance and uncouth regional accent did him no good in polite society. He once visited a respected but cantankerous senior scholar, and announced himself with the words: 'Has the news of me not reached thee? Has there not come to thee the tidings of me? I'm the twice-travelled, I'm Ibn Wāra!' This is not a quotation, but the wording echoes Koranic verses in a manner which in the context is ridiculous. His senior colleague sent him packing with a similar echo: 'Wāra! What is Wāra? And what shall teach thee what is Wāra?' Koranic references can be used in deadly earnest. In the late 1970s a London subway near Hyde Park was full of Arabic graffiti. One, obviously the work of a Shī'ite, invoked Sūra 111 to denounce the Sunnī Baathist regime in Iraq: 'Every Baathist man is an Abū Lahab, every Baathist woman is a carrier of firewood!'

The easiest place to get a sense of what a given Koranic passage has meant for Muslims is a Koran commentary, a genre which we have already met in the modern context. This literary form is very well developed in Islam; commentaries on the Vedas are by Islamic standards relatively late and sparse, though some Chinese classics probably have more of them than the Koran. The oldest Koran commentary extant as an independent work goes back to the eighth century, and much material in the commentarial literature is ascribed to even earlier authorities. Since then no century has passed without the composition of further commentaries; they were

still being composed in the traditional style in the nineteenth century. These commentaries differ from each other in length, style, and focus. It is characteristic of Muslim scholarship that, while they vary greatly in prestige, not one of them possesses an exclusive authority denied to the others.

To show how the traditional commentators went about things, I shall take the same three passages that I used to illustrate modern Koran commentary. We begin with the story of the Sabbath-breakers (Q7:163–6).

The Sabbath-breakers

If we are to profit from the truths which God enunciates in His book, we need to understand exactly what He is saying. The most basic task of a commentator is accordingly to address linguistic difficulties. The Koran has its share of these, and our passage contains three. One is the word which we translated ‘evil’ in ‘evil chastisement’ (though ‘strong’ would be a better fit to the views of the commentators): *ba‘īs.* This word, as the great exegete Ṭabarī makes clear, is more a textual problem than a semantic one: the seven, though they agreed on the consonants, were badly split on the vowels (four read *ba’īs;* a fifth read either *ba’īs, bīs,* or *bays,* according to the transmission; a sixth read *bi’s;* the seventh read either *ba’īs* or *bay’as*). Ṭabarī, however, knows what the word means, and selects the reading *ba’īs* accordingly. In the other two cases, there is no problem with the reading, but the meaning is in

dispute; these are the words translated ‘swimming shorewards’ *(shurra’an)* and ‘miserably slinking’ *(khāsi’īn)*. Thus for *shurra’an* the explanations of the commentators include ‘appearing on the surface of the water’, ‘following one another in sequence’, ‘raising their heads’, and ‘from every place’; ‘swimming shorewards’ is just another of these suggestions. Here it is the commentators who seem to be guessing wildly, with little to go on but the context.

Once the words are taken care of, the next thing we can expect of a commentator is that he should fill out the story. This is partly the straightforward task of providing additional detail. Thus God does not mention where the incident took place. The question is a reasonable one, and the commentators are ready with answers. Some place the ill-fated township on the Sea of Galilee, others on the Red Sea; the favourite location is Ayla (the ancient Elath, where the Jordanian port of ‘Aqaba is situated today).

But filling out the story often requires much more than adding such details. Look again at the Koranic narrative. Though it gives enough information to enable us to reconstruct the story, it is not really written as a narrative at all. Instead of beginning ‘Once upon a time’, it opens with the words: ‘And question them concerning the township which was bordering the sea, when they transgressed the Sabbath, when their fish came to them on the day of their Sabbath . . .’ In the context, this is an instruction to Muḥammad to question the Jews about a story which will embarrass them; the Jews, like God, clearly know the story already, and His concern is less to retell

it than to provide sufficient detail to identify it. Having done this, He jumps to the point in the story at which a dialogue is taking place between two groups which, plainly, had not been involved in the Sabbath-breaking: ‘And when a certain group of them said. . .’ Obviously some of the people of the township had broken the Sabbath by fishing on it. But God simply leaves us to infer this – whereas a human storyteller could be expected to make it his business to tell us how it happened.

This is the kind of gap the commentators have to fill, and they do so with elaborate detail which we can leave aside. We find a similar gap when we come to the process of metamorphosis. The Koran tells us that God said to the malefactors ‘Be you apes. . .’, but says nothing of the actual transformation which presumably ensued. The commentators, however, know all about it. They tell us how the virtuous inhabitants of the township awoke one morning to find that the malefactors had not yet opened the gates of their quarter. Puzzled, they brought a ladder and set it against the wall; one of them climbed up to look over, and was amazed to see that the malefactors had turned into monkeys. Devastated by the punishment which had overtaken them, these monkeys could no longer talk, but could still understand when spoken to, and would respond with gestures. Their virtuous fellow-citizens unlocked the gates for them, and the monkeys disappeared into the wilderness. None of this imaginative sequence is even hinted at in the Koran.

Now that we know, so far as is humanly possible, precisely what God means, and exactly what happened in those far-off times, we can fairly expect the commentator to go on to address whatever doctrinal issues may be raised by the passage. As we have already seen, the traditional commentators are not much exercised by the question whether the metamorphosis is to be understood literally; with a single exception, they take it for granted that it is. God is omnipotent, and does what He pleases. The real issue for the commentators was one of moral theology. In its elliptic way, the Koran seems to divide the people of the township into three groups. The first group broke the Sabbath, the second admonished them, and the third thought the admonition pointless. However, in describing God's response, the Koran mentions only two groups: those who were metamorphosed into monkeys, and those who were saved. Obviously those who broke the Sabbath were metamorphosed, and those who admonished them must surely have been saved. But what became of the third group, those who saw no point in the admonition? This was the issue over which the commentators agonized.

The degree of their concern is an indication that more was at stake here than a loose end in a story about the ancient Israelites. The Sabbath as such meant as little to the commentators as it does to most people in the West today. But the uncertain fate of the third group raised a much more general question: are people who keep silent in the face of evildoing – for all that they themselves do not

participate in it – to be reckoned among the damned or the saved? One does not have to believe in gods, Buddhas, or ghosts to recognize in this a perennial ethical dilemma.

Tolerating false religion

What did God intend when He said ‘No compulsion is there in religion’ (Q2:256)? Unlike modern commentators, the medieval scholars did not live in a world whose dominant culture proclaimed the axiomatic virtue of universal religious toleration. It was more or less common ground among monotheists in their day that some people outside one’s own religious community could be accorded a degree of toleration, while others could not be tolerated at all. In such a world, an apparent divine endorsement of indiscriminate toleration was bound to be problematic. The ‘sword verse’, after all, says nothing about toleration, while the ‘tribute verse’ allows it to some unbelievers but not to others.

What was at issue here was not primarily a question of practice. In practice, the scholars could find ways and means to widen the window of the ‘tribute verse’ sufficiently to accommodate just about anyone they were likely to encounter in the real world – anyone, that is, who submitted to Muslim rule. In the last resort they could always argue, as one fourteenth-century Damascene scholar did of the Indians, that if an infidel people was just too numerous to be put to the sword, then it was better to accept tribute from them than to

leave them alive and untaxed. But principles are principles, and if scholars did not care about them, who would?

Problems like that of the meaning of the ‘no compulsion verse’ arise in any culture that takes its canonical texts seriously. But they are more acute for those who regard them as scripture rather than as mere classics. When Homer said something that would better have been left unsaid, one option for the scholars of Hellenistic Alexandria was simply to ‘athetize’ it – to declare it spurious on the ground that Homer could not have said such a thing. It was even possible, without sacrilege, to entertain the notion that Homer might on occasion have dozed off; it is to Horace, as paraphrased by Pope, that we owe the phrase ‘Homer nods’. But in the Muslim context, this was unthinkable: God, as we know from the ‘throne verse’, neither slumbers nor sleeps. Even athetizing, though just thinkable, was much too radical for the Muslim scholars, for all that one heretical group is said to have held that Sūra 12 (which tells the story of the sexual harassment of Joseph by his master’s wife) was no part of the Koran.

Within the Islamic framework, the nearest acceptable approach to athetizing was abrogation: the ‘no compulsion’ verse could be declared to be abrogated by, say, the ‘sword verse’. It is standard Muslim doctrine that one verse of the Koran can abrogate another. This idea will cause no problems to anyone familiar with the Constitution of the United States of America; here an amendment may void a part of the original constitution, or an earlier

amendment, without the voided text being excised from the document. There are two significant differences. One is that amendments can still be made to the American Constitution, even though the founding fathers are long dead. The other is that, thanks to the way the document is organized, we hardly need a community of scholars to tell us what amends what. In this respect the Koran is less helpful – but scholars were always in plentiful supply.

Most of them, however, were unwilling to declare the 'no compulsion' verse to be abrogated. Their reluctance arose from the sense that, as an exegetical device, abrogation was strong medicine, and not to be resorted to when less drastic solutions were available. This makes sense: one does not want to encourage people to declare passages of scripture dead letter whenever it suits them.

A gentler way to deactivate scripture is to tie it to a particular context or audience. The false prophets of Luther's day were given to finding all sorts of intoxicating statements in the Bible. Luther's response was discouraging: 'It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God's word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it concerns you or someone else.' This strategy was well known to the Muslim commentators. Thus there was a view that the 'no compulsion' verse was revealed with specific reference to a certain group in Medina. In pre-Islamic times, we are told, a woman would swear an oath that if she bore a child, she would place it among the local Jews – the idea being to secure it a long life. When Islam came, there were some

children in this position. So when the Jewish tribe of Naḍīr was expelled from Medina, people said: ‘But Prophet! Our sons and brothers are among them!’ To this the Prophet had no answer until God sent down the ‘no compulsion’ verse, thereby ruling that it was for the children to choose between Judaism and Islam.

(This narrative could be combined with the view that the verse was subsequently abrogated, but it did not have to be.) Another suggestion was that the verse referred only to those eligible to pay tribute – in which case it added nothing to the ‘tribute verse’. This last was the view endorsed by Ṭabarī as the most correct.

Men and women

As we have seen, Q4:34 states that ‘men are the managers of the affairs of women’. This was a contention which male commentators in a civilized medieval society were unlikely to take issue with. They were not, however, entirely of one mind when it came to explaining the reasons for this arrangement.

Just why should men be the managers of the affairs of women? The Koran itself provides an answer: ‘for that God has preferred one of them over another, and for that they have expended of their property.’ The idea in the second part of this is clear enough: economically, women are getting something in return for their subjection to the authority of men. But what is the nature of God’s preference in the first part of the explanation? According to Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1148), yet another noted scholar of Muslim Spain, two

things are involved here. The first is the intellectual superiority of men over women, and the second is their superiority over them in religious performance. Tabarī, by contrast, makes no mention of these female deficiencies. Instead, he explains that the words ‘for that God has preferred one of them over another’ mean ‘on account of that in which God has preferred men over their wives, as paying the wives their dowries, paying them maintenance from their property, and supplying their needs’. In other words, he has collapsed God’s preference into the economic justification. This, he says, is how God has preferred men over women, and it is for this reason that men are the managers of their affairs.

It perhaps requires a certain cultural sensitivity to detect in Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the verse the thinking of a medieval Muslim feminist. Though he does not mention it here, Tabarī held the remarkable view that it was permissible for a woman to act as a judge. In this he was at odds with most of his fellow-scholars (not to mention the Earl of Cromer, a scathing modern critic of Muslim attitudes to women who was also a robust anti-feminist on his home ground). Ibn al-‘Arabī expresses himself with particular vehemence on this subject, but it will be more instructive to look at the rejection of Ṭabarī’s view by Māwardī (d. 1058), a scholar of Baghdad. He dismisses it on two grounds: that it goes against the consensus, and that it is incompatible with our verse. He goes on to explain God’s preference in terms of male superiority in intellect

and judgement, and concludes: ‘So it is not permissible for women to have authority over men.’

The other highlight of the verse is the instruction addressed to male believers to beat their rebellious wives when necessary. This did not embarrass the medieval commentators as it does their modern counterparts. They were men of their own times: the celebrated Jewish scholar Maimonides (d. 1204) took the view that a wife who refuses to perform her duties may be beaten. Their main concern was to make a firm distinction between beating a wife in some fashion, which God clearly allows in this verse, and beating her up, which He cannot be supposed to permit. (In the same way, most people in the West today distinguish between child abuse and a good smack.) A common way of drawing the line here was to say that the irate husband might beat his wife with a tooth-stick – the functional equivalent in Muslim culture of the Western toothbrush.

Although traditional Muslims were not embarrassed by the reference to beating in the verse, what is interesting is that some of them were clearly bothered by it. The position that it is best not to avail oneself of the right conferred by the verse is well represented, and there is even a view that the ‘beating’ envisaged is purely verbal. But the place where the ambivalence comes out most clearly is in stories involving the Prophet. We are told that Muḥammad, who himself never beat a woman, went so far as to ban the practice among his followers. His forceful Companion ‘Umar then pointed out to him that this was producing an undesirable shift in the

balance of power between husbands and wives, and urged upon him a renewal of the smack of firm government. Most poignantly, we hear of a case in which a man slapped his wife, who came to the Prophet to complain; Muḥammad was about to have the husband slapped in retribution, but God intervened by sending down the verse. Muḥammad's comment was: 'I wanted one thing, but God wanted another.' All told, we might be tempted to describe God as in this instance more patriarchal than the patriarchs.

God does not always appear in this light. The Prophet's wife Umm Salama is said to have complained to her husband that the Koran talks only about men. What came down in response was gender-inclusive language with a vengeance:

> Muslim men and Muslim women, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women, enduring men and enduring women, humble men and humble women, men and women who give in charity, men who fast and women who fast, men and women who guard their private parts, men and women who remember God oft – for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty reward. (Q33:35)

We should not perhaps assume too readily that sensitivity to feminist concerns is exclusively a feature of our own times.

Shīʻite commentators

Koran commentators, as has become apparent, do not all say the same thing. The differences are sometimes idiosyncratic, but they may also reflect deeper divisions of allegiance. The gulf between Sunnīs and Shīʿites is a case in point, and I shall end this chapter with some remarks on Shīʿite commentators (the Shīʿites who concern us being the Imāmīs or Twelvers, whose largest concentration today is in Iran). This category is not at all homogeneous: some Shīʿite commentaries are similar to Sunnī ones, while others are much more sectarian in their sources and concerns. We can leave aside the first type and concentrate on the second.

There is a pronounced strand of hostility in Shīʿism towards the standard Sunnī text of the Koran. It may be said to be incomplete or corrupted in various ways. For example, Q3:110 in the standard text begins:

> You are the best community (*umma*) ever brought forth to men. (Q3:110)

Shīʿite tradition has it that this should read: 'You are the best imams *(aʿimma)....'* This involves only a small change to the black *('ymh* for *'mh),* but it nevertheless serves to refocus the verse on the central Shīʿite theme of the imamate, the leadership of the Muslim community. There are fifty-odd Shīʿite readings of this kind for the Koran as a whole. In practice, however, the Shīʿites seem always to have accepted the authority of the standard text. It is this that they recite, and for the most part comment on; not till their redeemer

(the Qāʻim) appears will they venture to replace it with their own version.

I shall reluctantly confine myself to one example of the strongly sectarian variety of Shīʻite exegesis. ʻAyyāshī, a scholar of the early tenth century, quotes the following story in his commentary on Q7:163–6. In the city of Kūfa some people came to ʻAlī (the son-in-law of the Prophet and the founding figure of Shīʻism) to ask him about the eels which were on sale in the local markets – in other words, whether it was permissible for believers to eat them. He laughed, and invited them to witness a marvel. ʻAlī thereupon took them to the bank of a river, spat in it, and recited some words, whereupon an eel appeared with its head raised and its mouth open. ʻAlī asked the eel to identify itself; it duly explained on behalf of its fellows that they were the former inhabitants of ʻthe township which was bordering the sea', and quoted the Koranic verse. More significantly, the eel revealed the inner meaning of the passage: God had asked the people of the township to give allegiance to ʻAlī, and on their refusal they had been subjected to metamorphosis, some ending up in the sea as eels, others on land as lizards and jerboas. ʻAlī then turned to those present and asked them if they had taken all this in; they replied that indeed they had. He concluded the proceedings with a zoological observation which strongly underlined the human heritage of eels: ʻBy Him who sent Muḥammad as a prophet, they menstruate just as your women do!'

The religious culture underlying ‘Ayyāshī’s story is in some ways quite different from that of Sunnī scholasticism. Two of its themes are specifically Shī‘ite. One is obvious: the emphasis on allegiance to ‘Alī, which is a central value of Shī‘ism. The other needs a word of explanation. We are in a world in which one of the more visible badges of religious affiliation is what you do and do not eat. In this context, the significance of the eel is that it marks the sectarian divide – Sunnīs permit it, whereas Shī‘ites forbid it. This is the issue which is put to ‘Alī, and which he resolves in a Shī‘ite sense through a combination of the testimony of the eel and the argument from menstruation. Eels, in other words, are of human origin, and to eat them as Sunnīs do is tantamount to cannibalism.

Just as striking as these sectarian themes is the mythic quality of ‘Ayyāshī’s story. As we saw, the Sunnī commentators were at pains to fill out the details of the Koranic account of the Sabbath-breakers, and did so with considerable imagination. But they could not be accused of hijacking God’s story to construct a myth of their *own.* In the case of ‘Ayyāshī, by contrast, the details of the Koranic version no longer matter much: the Sabbath is brushed aside, and the monkeys are forgotten altogether. Instead, the Koranic verses are used as an occasion to project onto the distant past the Shī‘ite duty of affiliation to ‘Alī – a projection which is accomplished without any concern for what to us and the Sunnī commentators is gross anachronism. Conversely, the mythic nature of ‘Ayyāshī’s account is also evident in the way it serves to explain why the world is as it is

today: it tells us why certain species, being of human origin, may not be eaten by true believers. This contrast between Sunnī and Shīʿite exegesis should not be taken as hard and fast. It is not difficult to find sober scholarship among Shīʿite commentators, or wild speculation among Sunnī ones. But if we think in terms of a difference of emphasis, the contrast is real enough, though it is much less in evidence today than it was in the past.

Chapter 10
The Koran as an object of dogma

We are told that a man once came to the pious Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728) and said: 'Let's have a debate about religion.' Ḥasan replied: 'I know my religion. If you've lost yours, go and look for it.' Barbahārī (d. 941), a scholar-demagogue of Baghdad and a follower of Ibn Ḥanbal, quotes this anecdote approvingly, and says himself: 'You don't ask "Why?" and "How?" Theology, polemic, disputation, and argument are an innovation which casts doubt into the heart.' An innovation is something the first generation of Muslims did not do, and which therefore should not be done; for 'whoever asserts that there is any part of Islam with which the Companions of the Prophet did not provide us has called them liars'. These are stirring words. What they let slip, of course, is that theology, polemic, disputation, and argument were in fact a thriving industry in the early centuries of Islam. It is in the nature of theological cultures that they will not leave God alone, and spend much of their time splitting divine hairs.

There were in fact people in the early Islamic world who quite literally regarded God's hair as a topic for theological discussion (was it straight or curly?). They were marginal, but their thinking raises a point with much wider application. All monotheist religions

confront a dilemma when it comes to imagining God. On the one hand, He is intimately involved in the lives of believers; to relate to Him, they must therefore imagine Him in terms intelligible to humans. Yet on the other hand, God has to be sublime, transcendent, unimaginably different from us. In Islam, as in other monotheist faiths, there is scriptural support for both tendencies. Thus the Koran speaks of 'God's hand' (Q48:10) and 'the Face of thy Lord' (Q55:27), but it also tells us that 'like Him there is naught' (Q42:11). The tug-of-war between the two antithetical tendencies was a strong one. It was clearly unacceptable to imagine God with a body just like ours – to create God in our own image, with straight or curly hair, as anthropomorphists did. Yet just as clearly it would not do to strip Him of all intelligible attributes and reduce Him to a dialectical cipher. But just where was the safe middle ground?

The mother of all theological controversies in this field was the question of how God speaks. We know that He talks. In the passage on the Sabbath-breakers, for example, He tells us the very words He addressed to them (Q7:166). More generally, the whole Koran from beginning to end is God's word, and hence His speech. How then did He speak it? Are we to think of God as equipped with speech-organs in some way analogous to our own? Or does He speak in a quite different way, simply bringing a sound into existence, as it were in mid-air? Those tempted by the first view insisted that the Koran was 'God's speech' in a literal sense; those who inclined to the second view countered that the Koran was 'created'. The dispute escalated.

Those who denied that the Koran was created called it ‘uncreated’, and thus came to see it as co-eternal with God. This view in turn courted denunciation as polytheism. It nevertheless became the doctrine of most Sunnīs that the Koran was in some sense eternal.

The climax of the controversy came in the first half of the ninth century, when the Caliphs sought to impose on the scholars the anti-anthropomorphist doctrine that the Koran was created. In the case we know best, Ibn Ḥanbal was summoned before the Caliph Mu‘tasim (ruled 833–42) and subjected first to theological argument and then, when that failed to overcome his resistance, to a sustained flogging. An exchange which took place between Ibn Ḥanbal and the governor of Baghdad shortly before his appearance in front of the Caliph shows that, floggings apart, the culture of theological debate was flourishing, and it may also serve to illustrate the part played by the Koran in these disputes. The governor warned Ibn Ḥanbal that the Caliph would flog him blow after blow and throw him into a prison where he would never see the sun; these were matters on which a governor was well qualified to speak. But he was then unwise enough to attempt some amateur theology, based on the assumption that to ‘make’ and to ‘create’ are the same thing:

> Governor: Doesn’t God say: ‘We have *made it* an Arabic Koran’ (Q43:3)? How could it be *made* without being *created*?

Ibn Ḥanbal: But God says ‘and He *made* them like green blades devoured’ (Q105:5). Does that mean He *created* them [like green blades devoured]?

Governor: Take him away!

If God ‘made it an *Arabic* Koran’, can it be thought to contain loan-words deriving from other languages? Here the Muslim scholars disagreed. Some held that any word that had been accepted into the language counted as Arabic whatever its origin: for them *ṣirāṭ* was as Arabic as ‘street’ is English. Others considered it unthinkable that a word appearing in the Koran could be of foreign origin. Any resemblance was coincidence, or the result of borrowing by foreigners. Such views can still be encountered in the Islamic world. Yet in 1993 an Iranian publisher brought out a translation of a standard Western study of the ‘foreign vocabulary’ of the Koran. The print-run was 3,300 copies – far more than a Western publisher would allocate to such a work.

Ibn Ḥanbal’s lightening response brings us back to the ‘Men of the Elephant’, whom God must obviously have *created* on a different occasion from that on which he *made* them like green blades devoured. We can spare ourselves the more professional exchanges which followed in the presence of the Caliph. The subsequent flogging left Ibn Ḥanbal scarred for life, but he did not suffer in

vain: the eventual upshot of these commotions was the establishment of the dogma that the Koran was the uncreated word of God.

In a further escalation, this doctrine became a denial that God's word in any shape or form could be described as created. As Ṭabarī tells us in his creed, it is God's uncreated word, however it is written or recited, whether it be in heaven or on earth, whether written on the 'guarded tablet' or on the tablets of schoolboys, whether inscribed on stone or on paper, whether memorized in the heart or spoken on the tongue; whoever says otherwise is an infidel whose blood may be shed and from whom God has dissociated Himself. (The 'guarded tablet' of Q85:22 to which Ṭabarī refers here can be understood as a heavenly archetype like the 'hidden Book' of Q56:78.) Some, it is said, went so far as to say: 'My pronouncing the words of the Koran is uncreated.' Such views could provide an intransigent theological underpinning to the prohibition of touching a Koran while in a state of ritual impurity. They could also be dismissed as arrant nonsense, and they were.

In addition to being uncreated, the Koran was also inimitable. This time the idea itself is unambiguously Koranic. The background to one of the relevant passages is the rejection of Muḥammad's message by most of his contemporaries, and their extravagant demands for miracles – including that he should ascend to heaven and return with a book for them to read (Q17:86–96). In response to

this unfavourable climate of opinion, God instructs Muḥammad to issue a challenge:

> Say: 'If men and genies banded together to produce the like of this Koran, they would not produce its like, not though they backed one another.' (Q17:88)

In other verses, the challenge is to produce one or ten Sūras like the Koran (Q10:38, Q11:13).

There were two main ways to understand what was happening here. One view was that, in order to establish the credentials of His Prophet, God was intervening to prevent those challenged from succeeding; it was not that they lacked the necessary literary talent, but rather that God was blocking its exercise. This said nothing of interest about the Koran, and rendered the miracle rather trite. The other view was that the inimitability of the Koran was intrinsic: its literary perfection was such that no one on earth could hope to imitate it. This was a more interesting view, but it was also riskier, and we have persistent reports in the sources of people who had the audacity to rise to the challenge. It was nevertheless this view which became standard, thereby conferring on the Koran a transcendent literary status in Islamic culture.

The doctrines we have considered above seem to have been novelties in the history of monotheism. They do, however, have some parallels in Indian attitudes to the Vedas. Bīrūnī reports a

disagreement among the Hindus as to whether or not it was possible for anyone to compose anything in the metre of the Veda (the terminology he uses makes it clear that he has the Muslim parallel in mind). Much more salient in Indian culture was the controversy over the question whether the Vedas were eternal or created. Its implications were rather different from those of the Muslim dispute over the Koran. The ancient doctrine of the eternity of the Vedas insisted that they were also authorless; their claim to authority was precisely that they were not the word of a mere god, let alone a human. The contrary view, that they were in fact the creation of a god (albeit a rather special one), was powered by the rise of theism, but bore no relation to questions of anthropomorphism. And since the Vedas are an exclusively oral scripture, the central scholastic issue was the eternity of sound. ('Sound', said those who argued that the Vedas were created, 'is non-eternal, because it has the property of being produced, like a pot.') There is, nevertheless, a striking parallel here: as a way to enhance the status of a canonical text, it is hard to trump the doctrine of its eternity. Non-Muslim monotheists made little attempt to compete. The view that the Torah had existed for two thousand years before the creation of the world was found among the Jewish rabbis; but compared to the pre-eternity of the Koran, such a claim was modesty itself. Taken together, the doctrines which developed around the Koran accorded it a more elevated status than that of the Bible in either Judaism or Christianity.

There is one issue I have not discussed so far, though it is prominent in the history of Christian thought about the Bible. Long before our own times, Christians had begun to disagree on the question of the respective roles of God and man in producing scripture. Was it quite literally the word of God, dictated by the Holy Ghost to human scribes whose only role was to record it word by word? Or was it rather the product of human authors composing their works with divine assistance? The first view was that of the English Calvinist William Whitaker (d. 1595): 'Scripture', he stated, 'hath for its author God himself; from whom it first proceeded and came forth.' Such an approach was predominant among both Protestants and Catholics in his day. By contrast Henry Holden (d. 1662), an English Catholic who taught at the Sorbonne, spoke rather in terms of the 'special and Divine assistance' which is granted to the human author of a Biblical book. In this he was typical of many Catholics of his time (though he was saying something new and controversial when he went on to limit this assistance to doctrinal matters, to the exclusion of 'those things which are written by the bye, or have reference to something else not concerning Religion'). Interestingly enough, one argument against the dictation theory was that if each word of the Hebrew and Greek texts had been revealed, then the Latin Bible would not be holy scripture. Of the two devout English Christians mentioned in the preceding paragraph, only Whitaker might have made an acceptable Muslim and held down a job at the Azhar. Occasionally things were said in the traditional Islamic world which remind us of Holden. For example, there was a theory that

‘Gabriel brought down to the Prophet only the ideas’ (but, one assumes, *all* of the ideas); it was Muḥammad who ‘expressed them in the language of the Arabs’. Such views, however, had no place at the Islamic equivalents of the Sorbonne. The Koran was the speech of God; anyone who believed otherwise had lost his religion. The resistance of the modern Islamic world to higher criticism rests on more than the accident that it comes from a foreign source.

Part Four
The formation of the Koran

Chapter 11
The collection of the Koran

When we ask how God's speech came to be collected in the form in which we now read it, we leave theology firmly behind us and re-enter the world of history. The Koran as we know it displays a fair amount of textual variation to the red and yellow, but it is remarkably uniform with regard to the black. Typically, differences here affect no more than a single letter. The book as a whole thus consists always and everywhere of the same 6,200-odd verses in the same order (the exact number depends on the placing of the divisions between the verses, not on the text itself). This strikingly invariant text is known as the 'Uthmānic codex, since according to the standard account it was established on the initiative of the Caliph 'Uthmān (ruled 644–56), at some time around 650. (The vagueness of the date arises from the fact that the event seems to have had no place in the early Arabic annalistic tradition.) All the Korans which we possess today represent this recension, though as will be seen, this may not be true of all surviving fragments of the Koranic text. Let us first examine a version of the standard account, and then consider some of the difficulties that arise in connection with it.

According to a narrative quoted by Dānī, one of the Companions of the Prophet came to ʻUthmān and complained to him of the sharp divergences in Koranic recitation that had appeared among the Muslims – just as had been the case, he warned, among the Jews and Christians before them. ʻUthmān thereupon requested Ḥafṣa, one of the Prophet's widows, to send him the leaves she had in her possession, which she did. He appointed a group of five, and instructed them to copy these leaves into a single volume, monitoring the text as they went. The five were usually able to resolve their mutual disagreements among themselves, but a dispute about the exact form of a certain word had to be referred to ʻUthmān. Their work was not, however, confined to transcribing the leaves supplied to them by ʻUthmān. One of their number recollected hearing from the Prophet a certain verse (Q9:128 in our text), but could find no one who knew it until he consulted a certain Khuzayma; the verse was then included. Once the work was completed, ʻUthmān returned the leaves to Ḥafṣa. A parallel version of the same narrative tells us that he then sent out a copy of the new text to each of the provinces, and ordered all others to be destroyed. One thing this particular account fails to tell us is which provinces received copies. Dānī states that they were sent to Kūfa, Baṣra, and Damascus, while one remained in Medina; he adds that a less reliable tradition extends the list to Mecca, Yemen, and Baḥrayn.?

This is an entirely plausible story, and in some form it could well be true. But there are problems in terms of both what happened

afterwards and what went before. First let us glance at the evidence bearing on the subsequent history of the Koranic text.

In an early theological epistle which purports to have been written around 700 by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, the author at one point quotes the Koran as follows:

> Thus the word of thy Lord is realized against *the ungodly*
> that *they are the inhabitants of the Fire*.

This sounds Koranic enough, but what verse is he quoting? It cannot be Q10:33 in our text, since this reads:

> Thus the word of thy Lord is realized against the ungodly
> that *they believe not*. (Q10:33)

But neither can it be Q40:6, the only other verse that is similar to it in our text, since this reads:

> Thus the word of thy Lord is realized against *the unbelievers*
> that they are the inhabitants of the Fire. (Q40:6)

This cannot be just the carelessness of a later copyist, since in the passage immediately following the quotation, the author remarks: 'The promise of *punishment* was only realized against them after they had wrought *ungodliness*.' The hybrid, then, is locked into the text of the epistle. Now the scholars preserve a good many reports about

the divergences from the ‘Uthmānic codex found in some of the versions it superseded. One of them, that of Ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 652 or 653), had this text in Q40:6:

> Thus the word of thy Lord *went before* against *the ungodly* that they are the inhabitants of the Fire.

Our author shares one variant with this non-‘Uthmānic version (‘the ungodly’), but not the other (‘went before’); perhaps he is using some other non-‘Uthmānic version whose variants the scholars did not record. Clearly something had survived ‘Uthmān’s destruction, and whatever it was, it was still in common use several decades later. Indeed, the well-known Medinese jurist Mālik, who died in 795, still found it necessary to declare that the ruler had a duty to prevent the sale or recitation of the version of Ibn Mas‘ūd. As late as the tenth century there was an unsuccessful attempt to revive such readings, but by then they had long ceased to be part of a living tradition.

That the text of the Koran was not yet as firmly fixed in the decades after ‘Uthmān as it came to be later is also suggested by coins and official inscriptions of the last decade of the seventh century (for an example, see Fig. 5). These reproduce what is without any doubt Koranic material, but with variations comparable to that in Hasan al-Baṣrī’s epistle. Either the authorities were using a non-‘Uthmānic text, or else they felt free to paraphrase the ‘Uthmānic text. In the same or a slightly later period Ḥajjāj, the governor of Iraq, is

described as making a series of changes to the Koranic text which in several cases involved the substitution of one word for another, and as sending out copies to the provinces.

There are also variants to be found in early Koranic manuscripts. The oldest securely dated complete Korans we possess date only from the ninth century. There are, however, numerous fragments which, though resistant to precise dating, are clearly older; the earliest of them are generally thought to go back at least to the early eighth century, and perhaps to the seventh. This stratum is particularly well represented in the Ṣan'ā' collection. It would seem that preliminary work on these fragments can be summed up in three points. First, the range of variants is said to be considerably greater than is attested in our literary sources, though in *character* the variation does not appear to be very different from the kind of thing these sources record. Second, the orthography of these – and other – early fragments diverges from that with which we are familiar in one rather striking respect, namely the frequent failure to mark the long *ā* as part of the consonantal skeleton in such words as *qāla,* 'he said' (the spelling *ql* which appears in these fragments would in our text be read as *qul,* meaning 'say!'). Last but not least, those fragments which show the end of one Sūra and the beginning of another reveal some clear deviations from the standard order of the Sūras; these deviations are comparable to those reported by the literary sources for a couple of the versions superseded by the 'Uthmānic codex, but they do not regularly coincide with them.

There is accordingly evidence that, in the period after ʻUthmān, things were more complicated than the story of his establishment of the canonical text would suggest. This, however, is hardly surprising. Let us now turn to the period prior to his redaction. Here we have only the narratives and variants preserved in the literary sources to go on, as no first-hand attestation of the Koranic text seems to survive for this period. Taken as a whole, our sources yield disconcertingly different pictures of the prehistory of the ʻUthmānic text.

If we look carefully at the narrative quoted by Dānī, we discern the presence of two antithetical themes. One, which is central to the story as told in this account, is that the hard work had already been done by the time ʻUthmān went into action; all that remained was to copy the loose leaves of the scripture already in the possession of Ḥafṣa, and, of course, to bind the results into a codex. The other theme, which appears more or less as an afterthought in this account, points to a much more taxing process: a verse could only be put in place by finding someone who had it in his possession. The first suggests an edition, the second an actual collection. Most narratives make ʻUthmān little more than an editor, but there are some in which he appears very much as a collector, appealing to people to bring him any bit of the Koran they happen to possess. They respond by turning in texts on tablets, shoulder blades of animals, and stripped palm-branches. (Figure 21 shows what such a

shoulder blade might have looked like, though this one does not look very old.)

If we assume that ‘Uthmān did in fact get the material, or most of it, from Ḥafṣa, how did she come by it? In addition to being a widow of the Prophet, Ḥafṣa was also a daughter of ‘Umar, the second Caliph, who ruled from 634 to 644. He too is said to have collected the Koran in his day, indeed to have been the first to assemble it in a codex. (On this showing, of course, Ḥafṣa’s leaves should not have been loose.) He also appeals to people to bring him what they have, with similarly colourful results. And yet he is also said to have received the materials ready-made from his predecessor Abū Bakr. When we go back to the reign of Abū Bakr, who ruled from 632 to 634, the pattern is pretty much the same. He also is given credit for having been the first to collect the Koran between two covers. Again we have vivid accounts of the collection of the material from very dispersed sources. And once again, there are also accounts which suggest that in fact the material had already been assembled – in this case, in the time of the Prophet.

21. Shoulder blade of a camel with the Fātiḥa. The writer departs from traditional Koranic orthography, among other things by inserting a long ā in *māliki* in the black.

We thus face serious contradictions in our source material regarding two issues: who collected the Koran, and what it was collected from. In historical terms, the differences between the rival accounts are not trivial. Most obviously, an early redaction of material already assembled in the Prophet's lifetime would inspire considerable confidence in our text of the Koran. By contrast, a late collection of material that was still dispersed would encourage us to credit the numerous early reports in our sources which tell us that 'Uthmān's Koran was incomplete, perhaps dramatically so. 'Let none of you

say', averred the pious son of the Caliph 'Umar, 'that he has the whole Koran in his possession. How does he know what the whole of it is? Much of the Koran has gone.' (This may remind us of Indian laments about lost Vedas.) A curious story relates that the written record of a verse laying down the stoning penalty for adultery was lost when it was eaten by a goat at the time of the Prophet's death.

What all this raises is a question of method. Should we simply accept the historicity of one element in our source material – say the standard account of 'Uthmān's establishment of the canonical text – and interpret or reject the other elements accordingly? Or might more radical doubts be in place? We can best defer this question until we have considered the Koran as it may have been in the lifetime of the Prophet.

In the meantime, there is one larger historical point which we can make with some assurance despite these uncertainties: by the standards of other places and times, the process by which the Koran achieved the status of a canonical text seems to have been quite unusually rapid. In part, this reflects the fact that the Muslims did not have to invent the idea of a scriptural canon for themselves. Our sources are, however, entirely persuasive in relating the speedy canonization of the Koran to the initiative of the state. There is a significant contrast here with the slow and unsteady emergence of both Biblical canons. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, the process took place long after the demise of the Israelite monarchy; in the case of the New Testament, the gradual formation of the canon was

already far advanced by the time the Roman state adopted Christianity. The fact that for all practical purposes we have only a single recension of the Koran is thus a remarkable testimony to the authority of the early Islamic state.

Chapter 12
The Koran in the lifetime of the Prophet

The heavenly archetype of the Koran is a book. The Koran we have here on earth is likewise a book. It might therefore seem natural to expect that God would have revealed His speech as a complete text – sending it down 'all at once', as the carping unbelievers thought that He should have done (Q25:32). Instead, the Muslim sources describe a process of revelation which is at once oral and piecemeal. The revelation is transmitted orally by Gabriel to Muḥammad, who recites it, and has scribes write it down. And it arrives passage by passage, in an order quite different from that of the Koran as we have it. Did Muḥammad then gradually reassemble the material into its archetypal order? Here the testimony of our sources is divided. One later view was that he did everything short of making a codex of the revelation; but we also have it on early authority that, at the time he died, the Koran had not been collected at all. Either way, we have to think of the Koran in the lifetime of the Prophet as revelation 'in progress'. It is this serial character of the process that makes sense of the idea of abrogation.

Occasions of revelation

The concept of piecemeal revelation provided wide scope for linking particular passages in the Koran to incidents in the life of the Prophet. What, for example was the very first revelation he received? The favourite answer was the first five verses of Sūra 96, which opens with the words: 'Recite in the Name of thy Lord who created' (Q96:1). What then was the last revelation that came down to him? One of several answers was Q9:128, which we have already met in an analogous role as the last verse to be put in place when the Koran was collected. Innumerable narratives connect one passage or another to intermediate points in the life of the Prophet. We have already encountered one striking example: it was on the occasion of Umm Salama's feminist protest that Q33:35 was revealed. There is, of course, something odd about the idea that this verse should at one and the same time be a part of a pre-eternal scripture and a response to a woman's passing complaint. But there is no theological problem here: God already knew in past eternity everything that Umm Salama would ever say or do.

Because the reader is probably curious about it, I shall devote some space to a link of this kind that has become notorious even in the West. Here is the relevant verse:

> We sent not ever any Messenger or Prophet before thee,
> but that Satan cast into his fancy, when he was fancying;
> but God annuls what Satan casts, then God confirms His
> verses. (Q22:52)

God seems to be speaking of some process whereby Satan has made attempts to corrupt the text of previous scriptures by interpolation. Moreover, the use of the present (or it could be future) tense in the second part of the verse – God 'annuls' and 'confirms' – suggests that Satan is continuing his efforts. A narrative describing an attempt by Satan to insinuate something into Muḥammad's revelation, and God's timely response, would thus be in place here. And sure enough we have it: this is the story of the Satanic verses.

According to the story, Muḥammad while still in Mecca was deeply affected by his love for his people, pagans though they were, and yearned to find a way to win them over to his cause. It happened that at this point God sent down Sūra 53, and Muḥammad recited it. However, when he reached a pair of verses naming three pagan goddesses (Q53:19–20), Satan took advantage of his state of mind to cast onto his tongue the two verses: 'These are the exalted cranes, and their intercession is to be hoped for.' We can leave aside the puzzling ornithology of Satan's interpolation; what matters is its recognition of the pagan goddesses as legitimate intermediaries between man and God. This concession to polytheism greatly pleased the pagans, and when Muḥammad reached the last verse of the Sūra, they joined in the prostration enjoined there (Q53:62). But Gabriel subsequently upbraided Muḥammad for his lapse, and the Prophet became very upset and afraid. God, however, treated him kindly, sending down Q22:52 to reassure him that such things had

happened to other prophets before him, and proceeded to put matters right.

As told in the traditional Muslim sources (though not perhaps as retold by Salman Rushdie), this story is an attractive one because it continues an old monotheist theme: men of God, even the greatest of them, are only human. Moses tried to get out of his mission by pleading that he was inarticulate (Ex. 4:10), and later smashed the tablets God had given him in a fit of temper (Ex. 32:19). Jesus at Gethsemane lost his nerve so far as to pray: 'O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me' (Matt. 26:39). So the story is in good company. But is it likely to be true? It has been rejected in the Muslim world for several centuries as incompatible with the dogma that prophets are immune from error. From a historian's point of view, however, the objections are somewhat different. Thus one thing we have to ask ourselves is whether it was the occurrence of the event that called forth Q22:52, as the story claims, or whether it was rather the existence of the verse that called forth the story. The narrative perhaps shares with a good many other such accounts the adventitious quality of a 'just so story'.

Meccan and Medinan revelations

According to Hishām ibn 'Urwa (d. about 763), everything in the Koran which speaks of the communities and generations of the past, or establishes the credentials of the Prophet, was revealed to him in Mecca. By contrast, everything that prescribes duties and norms of

behaviour was revealed to him in Medina. A division of this kind (with allowance for a limited amount of material revealed elsewhere) is fundamental to Muslim scholarship on the Koran, and it has likewise been adopted by Western scholars. Both proceed by allocating each Sūra to one of the two cities, but both are then prepared to assign particular passages of the Sūra in question to the other city. They then go on to set up a further chronology – relative or absolute – within each of the two bodies of revelation. The main difference is perhaps that Western scholars tend to pay more explicit attention than most Muslim ones to differences of content and style. On both sides, however, there is broad agreement on the general outlines, despite extensive divergence on the details. Irrespective of how far this approach is historically valid, it can help us to think about the different kinds of material we find in the Koran.

A typical 'early Meccan' piece is Sūra 105, the 'Sūra of the Elephant'. Here is the entire Sūra, minus the initial invocation:

> Hast thou not seen how thy Lord did with the Men of the Elephant?
>
> Did He not make their guile to go astray?
>
> And He loosed upon them birds in flights,
>
> hurling against them stones of baked clay

and He made them like green blades devoured. (Q105:1–5)

I have marked the verse-division here by giving each verse a separate line.

This is perhaps an example of what Hishām meant by revelations which refer to the ‘generations’ of the past – though in this case, it would seem, a recent past. As often in such Meccan material, the point is to invoke a bygone instance of divine punishment as a dire warning to the Prophet’s contemporaries. Just as in the case of the Sabbath-breakers, there is no concern to tell a story for the benefit of those who do not know it. If we seek a narrative of the events alluded to, we must turn to the Muslim scholars. They tell us that God was responding to an attack on the Meccan sanctuary which took place around the time Muḥammad was born (thus he ‘sees’ the incident only in his mind’s eye). The attack was mounted by Abraha, a ruler in Yemen whose army was, of course, equipped with an elephant – or, as Āyatullāh Makārim Shīrāzī informs us in his commentary, a plurality of elephants. (For readers interested in historical facts, we know that this Abraha really did rule in sixth-century Yemen, and that he mounted an expedition in the direction of Mecca; as to the elephant which provides the link with our Sūra, and the aerial bombardment mentioned there, God knows best.) Despite the absence of narrative in the Koranic account, the language is vivid, we might even be tempted to say poetic – for all that the Koran insists that Muḥammad was not a poet (Q69:41).

Let us now look at the Sūra in the original Arabic:

a-lam tara kayfa fa‘ala rabbuka bi-aṣḥābi ‘l-fil

a-lam yaj‘al kaydahum fī taḍlīl

wa-arsala ‘alayhim ṭayran abābīl

tarmīhim bi-ḥijāratin min sijjīl

fa-ja’alahum ka-’aṣfin ma’kūl

As is apparent, the Sūra consists of a succession of rather short verses. They are not lines of poetry: there is no overall metrical pattern, and whereas the first verse has as many as seventeen syllables, the rest have only ten to twelve. On the other hand, the rhyme is unmistakable, though not entirely uniform. There is also an artistry in the distribution of long vowels: except in the fourth verse, they appear only towards the end of each verse. Some of this is peculiar to this Sūra, but much Meccan material exhibits the same general character. We have already met Sūra 112 in the context of prayer and recitation:

Say: ‘He is God, One,

God, the Everlasting Refuge,

who has not begotten, and has not been begotten,

and equal to Him is not anyone.' (Q112)

qul huwa 'llāhu aḥad

allāhu 'l-ṣamad

lam yalid wa-lam yūlad

wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan ḥad

In this case the rhyme is perfect, but the variation in the number of syllables per verse is even greater. A typical feature of Koranic diction exemplified here is the 'say' format; we have already encountered it several times, for example in God's instructions to Muḥammad to issue the challenge of Q17:88.

By contrast, typically Medinan material is likely to strike us as prosaic. The verse on women with which we are already familiar is a case in point:

> Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that God has preferred one of them over another, and for that they have expended of their property. Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God's guarding.

> And those you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches, and beat them. If they then obey you, look not for any way against them; God is All-high, All-great. (Q4:34).

This passage consists of a single verse, for all that it is longer than Sūras 105 and 112 put together. Instead of poetic diction, we have expository prose. The principle of male dominance is enunciated, and supported with two justifications. Female behaviour in respect of this principle is then dealt with under two headings: that which conforms to the principle, and that which violates it. In the latter case, a series of practical measures are listed, together with an instruction to desist if they prove successful.

The residual link with the style of the Meccan material is at the end of the verse: 'God is All-high, All-great.' This adds nothing to the substance of the verse, and does not tell us anything about God that we did not already know. Its functions lie elsewhere. First, it tells us that the verse has come to an end – which in prosaic language of the kind found here might not otherwise be apparent. Second, it carries the rhyme. The next verse is going to end in a similar phrase, namely 'God is All-knowing, All-aware'. Now look at the two phrases in the original Arabic:

> *inna 'llāha kāna 'aliyyan kablrā*
>
> *sinna 'llāha kāna 'alīman khabīrā*

The rhyme extends to three syllables, and the overall parallelism could hardly be stronger. This tacking-on of a rhyme-bearing phrase is very common in Medinan material. But there are also intermediate cases; one of them is the passage on the Sabbath-breakers (Q7:163–6), which though it occurs in a Sūra regarded as Meccan, is reckoned to be Medinan. Here the verse-ends are:

bi-mā kānā yafsūqun (for their ungodliness)

la ʻallahum yattaqūn (haply they will be godfearing)

bi-ma kānū yafsuqūn (for their ungodliness)

khāsi'īn (miserably slinking)

None of these phrases is simply an add-on. The second appears elsewhere in the Koran as one that closes verses. The last is typical of the lack of uniformity in Koranic rhyming patterns (compare the final verse of Sūra 105). However, the main point to note here is that the first and third phrases (which are identical) display an otherwise unnecessary grammatical elaboration: *kānū yafsuqūn* could more simply be expressed by *fasaqā,* were it not that this would fail to carry the rhyme. A more jarring instance of the pull of the rhyming pattern occurs at the end of the account of the creation of humans which I quoted in Chapter 2 (Q23:12–14). God is described there as 'the fairest of creators' *(aḥsanu ʻl-khāliqīn);*

without proper guidance, a literal-minded reader might be tempted to infer from this the existence of creators – albeit inferior ones – other than God.

Rough edges

The approaches we have considered so far in this chapter are based on going *outside* the Koran in order to relate the content of scripture to events or phases in the Prophet's life. But the Koran itself can tell us something about its own history. A key point here is that those responsible for the final redaction of our text seem to have had a minimalist approach to editing. We can see this if we look at one of the two verses in the book which mention a contemporary of Muḥammad's by name:

> When thou wast saying to him whom God has blessed and thou hast favoured, 'Keep thy wife to thyself, and fear God', and thou was concealing within thyself what God should reveal, fearing other men; and God has better right for thee to fear Him. So when Zayd had accomplished what he would of her, then We gave her in marriage to thee, so that there should not be any fault in the believers, touching the wives of their adopted sons, when they have accomplished what they would of them; and God's commandment must be performed. (Q33:37)

This starts with a long and quite complicated subordinate clause, but we never learn what the clause is subordinate to. In this part of the verse, God is consistently referred to in the third person ('whom God has blessed', etc.). Then follows a complete sentence in which God speaks in the first person plural ('We gave her in marriage to thee'; compare Genesis 1:26: 'Let us make man in our image'). Finally, the verse is closed with a tag in which God is back in the third person ('and God's commandment must be performed'). This grammatical switching of persons is quite common in the Koran; another example appears in the verse which is said to have come down in connection with the Satanic verses (Q22:52). The final redactors of the text clearly did not consider it their business to edit such things out – or even to correct what appear to be outright grammatical errors (e.g. Q2:177). This goes well with the absence from the Koran of anything that looks like an interpolation reflecting events subsequent to the Prophet's death. The Synoptic Gospels place in the mouth of Jesus a suspicious prophecy of the destruction of the Temple (Mark 13:2, etc.), an event which took place several decades after his death, but fairly close to the time when the Gospels were being written. There is no sign that the redactors of the Koran gave way to any such temptation. In short, the final editing of the text was very conservative. To scholars this is a godsend. It means that rough edges have not been smoothed out; and rough edges in a text can be valuable clues to an earlier state of the material it contains.

One example of this is the extensive occurrence of parallel passages. Thus stories of the prophets of old may be related in a number of different Sūras. Significant amounts of material will be common to two or more such retellings, but at the same time there will be substantial differences. We have already seen this kind of effect on a small scale in the case of the two verses which we set alongside Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's anomalous Koranic quotation (Q10:33, Q40:6). It is hard to illustrate the larger phenomenon succinctly, but let us compare parts of two versions of the story of Ṣlliḥ and Thamūd. Thamūd is a known people of ancient Arabia; the Koran tells us that God sent Ṣāliḥ to them as their prophet. The first version begins as follows:

> And to Thamūd their brother Ṣāliḥ; he said, 'O my people, serve God! You have no God other than He; *there has come to you a clear sign from your Lord* – this is the She-camel of God, to be a sign for you. Leave her that she may eat in God's earth, and do not touch her with evil, lest you be seized by a painful chastisement. (Q7:73)

The second version begins in exactly the same way, and agrees with the first word for word up to the point where my italics begin. It then continues: 'It is He who produced you from the earth and has given you to live therein . . .' (Q11:61). In the course of this new material there is a reference to a 'clear sign from my Lord' (Q11:63), but in a different context. Then suddenly we are back with the exact

wording of the first version, from the point where my italics stop to the end of the verse (Q11:64). The only difference is that this time the chastisement is not 'painful' *(alīm*) but 'nigh' *(qarīb*); these adjectives stand last in their respective verses, and in each case the choice is related to the rhyme-pattern. Clearly the divergence between the two passages was generated by an agency for which the material possessed a degree of plasticity of a quite different order from anything we see in the textual variants attested by the oldest manuscripts or transmitted by the Muslim scholars. Here, then, we have a window onto a time when Koranic material – here on earth at least – was in a state of considerable flux.

I should perhaps end by making explicit a point that has been implicit all through this chapter. It relates to one of the ways in which the Koran is unlike the Bible. If we want to know something about the lives of Moses and Jesus, we go to the relevant books of the Bible, and they tell us. We may or may not believe the story as told there, but there are almost no other sources that contribute anything that matters. By contrast, while the Koran tells many stories after its fashion, that of Muḥammad is not among them. There are references to events in his life, but they are only references, not narratives. In addition, the book is not given to mentioning names in the context of its own time. Muḥammad himself is named four times, and a couple of his contemporaries once each; eight western-Arabian place-names appear, again once each. To write the biography of the Prophet on the basis of the

Koran alone is simply not an option, and for this reason it is almost impossible to relate the scripture to his life without going outside it.

Chapter 13
Doubts and puzzles

In the previous chapter we looked at two Sūras in the original Arabic. They may not have meant much to the reader with no previous exposure to the language, but overall they are not difficult texts. In Sūra 105, there is nothing that is beyond the powers of an undergraduate equipped with the standard dictionary of modern literary Arabic bar the words *abābīl* and *sijjīl.* In Sūra 112, the same is true bar the word *ṣamad* (provided we read *kufu'an* for the isolated *kufuwan* of Ḥafṣ from Āṣim). The strange thing about these words is that the student who goes on to make a scholarly career in Islamic studies will still not know what they mean decades later. We met similar obscurities in the verses on the Sabbath-breakers (Q7:163–6). They are typical of a whole cluster of linguistic puzzles in the text of the Koran, and translations can do no more than gloss over them by picking and choosing among a welter of competing guesses. These guesses are usually the work of the Muslim commentators, but Western scholars have not hesitated to contribute new ones of their own.

Sometimes, of course, the obscurity is in place. Sūra 101, as we have seen, begins: 'The Clatterer! What is the Clatterer? And what shall

teach thee what is the Clatterer?' In such a context it would be presumptuous to rush in too quickly with an explanation; God is making the point that He knows something we don't. There are also cases where the exigencies of rhyme must be borne in mind: *abābīl, sijjīl,* and *ṣamad* are cases in point. But in other instances there are no such extenuating circumstances. The 'tribute verse', which is of fundamental legal importance for the Islamic state, lays down that the unbelievers in question are to pay the tribute 'out of hand' *('an yadin,* Q9:29); what this simple phrase intends remains as elusive to modern scholars as it was to the medieval commentators. Two long Medinan verses set out a complex law of inheritance (Q4:11–12), again a very practical matter. The second includes an account of what happens in the event that 'a man is inherited from by *kalāla';* this word, which also occurs in Q4:176, seems to have bothered the commentators from the earliest times, and remains obscure to this day. Something without any such practical significance, but very strange nonetheless, is the fact that about a quarter of the Sūras of the Koran begin with concatenations of mysterious letters to which no meaning can be attached. The first verse of Sūra 19, for example, is *k-h-y-'ṣ* (this is read by reciting the names of the Arabic letters).

Each such item is a puzzle. Somebody must once have known what it meant, and yet that knowledge did not reach the earliest commentators whose views have come down to us, let alone ourselves. It is only natural that modern scholars should continue to search for solutions. But the larger puzzle is why obscurities of this

kind should be so salient a feature of the Koran. It is not in general surprising that scriptures and classics should be like this. Often a long period separates the culture in which such a work originated from that of the oldest scholarly traditions which interpret its meaning for us. But on any conventional account of the early history of Islam, there should not have been such a gap in the case of the Koran.

An unconventional approach to the problem will do considerable violence to the generally accepted picture of how things happened, but the puzzle may nonetheless be worth pursuing. Logically there are two ways in which we could seek to generate a gap that would account for the obscurities. One is to suppose that the materials which make up the Koran did not become generally available as a scripture until several decades after the Prophet's death, with the result that by the time this happened, memory of the original meaning of the material had been lost. The other is to speculate that much of what found its way into the Koran was already old by the time of Muḥammad. The two approaches do not exclude each other. Each has its attractions, and each has its problems – notably the need to reject much of what our narrative sources tell us.

The main point in favour of a hypothesis in which the Koran is off the scene for several decades is that it also accounts for another set of puzzles thrown up by research into the early development of Islamic law. Each of these involves an aspect of Islamic law which in some very fundamental way seems to contradict or ignore the

Koran. For example, it is notorious that Islam prescribes stoning as the standard penalty for proven adultery (zinā), and accredited traditions about the legal activity of the Prophet portray him as reluctantly implementing this punishment. Yet if we turn to the Koran, this is what we read:

> The fornicatress *(al-zāniya)* and the fornicator *(al-zānī)* – scourge each of them a hundred stripes. (Q24:2)

How this discrepancy could have arisen was a question to which the Muslim scholars had their answers, one of which we have already encountered in the shape of a hungry goat; but the solutions put forward were neither simple nor straightforward.

The other hypothesis mentioned above is that much of the material that found its way into the Koran might have been appropriated from elsewhere – a kind of terrestrial version of the dogma of the pre-existence of the Koran. This could arguably be supported from some curious mismatches between the scripture and the biography of the Prophet. For example, it was long ago pointed out that the Koran speaks of seafaring in a manner that is surprising for someone who is supposed to have had no direct experience of it. (The objection falls, of course, if we regard God as the author of the book.) But given that the language of the Koran is for the most part a readily intelligible Arabic, it is unlikely that any such milieu could have been very far away in either space or time. As far as place is concerned, consider the following verses:

> Lot too was one of the Envoys; when We delivered him and his people all together, save an old woman among those that tarried; then We destroyed the others, and you pass by them in the morning and in the night; will you not understand? (Q37:133–8)

The story alluded to is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19), which takes us to the borders of Palestine. This is a region in which Sozomenus, a fifth-century Christian historian of local origin, describes a significant development among the Arabs, or Saracens as he calls them. A group of them had come into contact with Jews, and had rediscovered from them their Biblical descent from Abraham's son Ishmael; they accordingly adopted Jewish laws and customs. Since that time, he tells us, many of them live in the Jewish way. What he describes is not Islam, but it anticipates the fusion of monotheism with Arab identity that is fundamental to it. If we are inclined to pursue the idea of a pre-existence of Koranic material, it is in a milieu such as this that it might have come into existence.

I shall end this chapter by picking out, not quite at random, a couple of examples of the many ideas that have been put forward in the last quarter-century of Western scholarship on the Koran. The first, which presupposes a very unconventional approach to the emergence of the scripture, concerns the phenomenon of parallel passages. John Wansbrough, who dubbed them 'variant traditions', suggested that we might have here the results of the development of

‘independent, possibly regional, traditions incorporated more or less intact into the canonical compilation’. This is one way to account for the phenomenon; but we could equally assume that Muḥammad had a certain stock of material, and made different use of it on different occasions. Yet Wansbrough does force us to take seriously the fact that the phenomenon has to mean something. The second idea, which is much less heretical in its assumptions, concerns the liturgical role of the scripture. As we saw, the Koran, despite the prominent part it plays in Muslim life, is used only to a limited extent in the liturgy proper – in marked contrast to the Bible among Jews and Christians. Why should this be so, and was it always so? Angelika Neuwirth, who highlighted the problem, found in the Meccan material of the Koran indications that it took shape in liturgical contexts which subsequently disappeared. Again, there is something distinctly illuminating about the suggestion; but as tends to be the case with interesting ideas about the Koran, it probably cannot be proved.

Chapter 14
Conclusion

It is in the nature of a scripture or a classic to be two things at once. On the one hand, it is a product of *its own* time. Indeed, it is precisely this temporal distance that calls forth the elaborate pattern of scholastic activity that comes to surround such a text – the efforts to preserve its original wording, explain its obscurities, interpret its meaning, and so forth. And on the other hand, it has authority in *our* time. Were it to lose this authority, it would no longer be a scripture or a classic, just a text of interest to people who are curious about the past. Being these two things at once is a tense assignment, and we can end this book by asking how well the Koran is equipped to discharge it in this day and age. We can best answer the question against the background of the wider set of Eurasian scriptures and classics of which the Koran is a member. How does it stand out in this company?

In the first place, it is remarkably well defined and compact. There were four Vedas – each transmitted in different Brahmin lineages – together with a mass of associated material that would be included on a broad definition of the canon. There were two Homeric epics, this time transmitted in the same lineage, though this milieu also

gave rise to the Homeric Hymns, whose place in the canon was marginal. When the Biblical canon was eventually settled, there were thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and twenty-seven of the New; there was also a good deal of apocryphal material which appeared in some people's Bibles but not in others. There was enough of the Buddhist Tripitaka to take up 130,000 blocks when the Chinese printed a translation of it in the late tenth century; today the Pāli canon fills several shelves in a library. In Confucian China there were differing views as to the exact number and identity of the classics. The Koran, in contrast to all this, is a single book of well-defined content between two covers. Though it is not quite seamless – there were, as we have seen, divergent views about what should or should not have been included – there is no simple way to partition it into components of distinct origin. There are other texts in Islam which have some kind of canonical status, but they are quite distinct from the Koran, and on a different level.

In the second place, if we leave aside the question of its celestial pre-existence, the Koran is a remarkably late work to have achieved the canonical status it did. Even the relatively parvenu scriptures of the New Testament are several centuries older. There are, of course, more recent books that enjoy scriptural status among such groups as the Sikhs and Mormons. But the Koran is the latest work to acquire this status in a world civilization – a fact related to the late and unusual origin of the entire culture.

In the third place, the Koran is emphatically a scripture rather than a classic. Indeed, it could well be described as the paradigmatic scripture, the word of God in the most immediate, uncompromising sense. At the same time the Koran is inimitable and, for most Muslims, uncreated; its sanctity extends to the codex as a physical object in the hands of the believers. To use Abū Zayd's term, it is an icon.

All these features are relevant to the fortunes of the Koran today. Its rather narrowly religious focus has undoubtedly limited its attraction for non-Muslim readers. Whereas for us the Homeric epics *are* literature, and the Bible can be read *as* literature, Western readers tend not to turn to the Koran unless their object is to learn about Islam. But within the Muslim community, this feature of the book serves only to accentuate its message, and at the same time the other points mentioned above work strongly in its favour. Because the Koran appeared relatively late in world-historical terms, it is possible for the language in which it is written to retain a significant degree of identity with one of the great literary languages of the modern world – or to put it differently, Arabic is the only major classical language in current use. At the same time, the compactness and sharp definition of the canon is extraordinarily convenient when it comes to disseminating it among large numbers of believers in the modern world. These features of the Koran are playing their part in the resilience of Islam as a belief-system which is so striking

a feature of the world we live in. So also is its call to the Straight Path – the path besides which all else is manifest error.

This, of course, is a rather fundamentalist statement of the message, though one which has achieved a remarkable resonance in the Islamic world in recent decades, and may well continue to enjoy it for some time to come. But perhaps we should not give the last word to the fundamentalists. In 1998, for example, a book was published in the Islamic Republic of Iran by ʻAbd al-Karīm Surūsh, a leading religious intellectual. This volume (brought out in 5,000 copies) sets out a defence of religious pluralism under the evocative – not to say subversive – title *Straight Paths (Ṣirāṭ-hā-yi mustaqīm*). Like any serious interpreter of a religious tradition, Surūsh does not simply impose the concerns of his own time on those of the scripture. Quite the contrary, he is able to find support for his pluralism in the fact that, the Fātiḥa apart, the Koran tends to speak not of 'the Straight Path' but of 'a straight path' – as when God assures Muḥammad that he is on 'a straight path' (Q36:4). Thanks to this Surūsh can read his scripture as tacitly allowing for a plurality of paths to salvation. It would take a prophet to tell us what future awaits such ideas in the Islamic world. In the meantime, it may not be wholly accidental that Surūsh writes in Persian. The very title of his book would defy translation into Arabic.

A note on Arabic

This note has two purposes. The first is to say something about the language which is so central to the character of the Koran. The second is to provide some guidance (though not very much) to the reader who finds it frustrating to have no idea about how to pronounce the Arabic words and names transcribed in this book.

The Arabic language

Arabic belongs to a closely related family of languages conventionally known as ‘Semitic’; some other members of the family are Akkadian, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Ethiopic. In demographic and cultural terms, Arabic has been by far the most successful of the Semitic languages. It is the only one to become the language of a world civilization, and the only one that has the status of a world language at the present day.

The single most striking feature of the Semitic languages, well exemplified in Arabic, is a system of triconsonantal roots. Consider the English forms ‘sing’, ‘sang’, ‘sung’, and ‘song’. Here the root can be identified as the pair of consonants *s* and *ng,* while the changes rung on the intervening vowel serve to mark a variety of verbal forms and a noun. That English is not a Semitic language is,

however, evident in two ways: the system operates on pairs of consonants, not trios; and the patterning is rather limited and highly irregular (we cannot use what we have learnt to relate the words ‘hit’, ‘hat’, ‘hut’, and ‘hot’). Typical Arabic triconsonantal roots are *k-t-b* and *q-r-’*, the former referring to writing and the latter to reading or reciting; the reader who knows that *kataba* means ‘he wrote’ and *kātib* (plural *kuttāb)* One who writes’ can have the instant gratification of correctly translating *qara’a* as ‘he recited’ and *qāri’* (plural *qurrā*) as ‘reciter’. Like English, Arabic also modifies roots with suffixes and prefixes: *qur’ān* (’reading’ or ‘recitation’) gives us the English ‘Koran’, and a *muqri’* is someone who teaches others to recite.

The pronunciation of Arabic

The reader must have noticed some features of transcribed Arabic that by ordinary English standards are a bit outlandish. Here are some explanations of these oddities.

a, i, u against *ā, ī, ū*

The first three are short vowels, the last three long vowels. The difference is comparable to that between the vowels in such standard English pairs as: ‘fat’/‘father’; ‘fit’/‘feet’; ‘full’/‘fool’.

dh, *gh, kh*

Here *dh* is the voiced version of *th* (so *dh* is the ‘th’ of English ‘this’, whereas *th* is the ‘th’ of ‘thistle’); *kh* is the ‘ch’ in the Scottish ‘loch’; *gh* is a voiced *kh* (like the ‘g’ in the Spanish ‘Málaga’, or the ‘r’ in the German ‘rein’ or the French ‘rue’). But *sh* is just as in English.

ḍ, ṣ, ṭ, ẓ, against *d, s, t, z,* and *q* against *k*

The forms with the subscript dot (together with *q*, sometimes transcribed *ḳ*) are distinguished from the normal forms by what phoneticians call ‘emphasis’, though the term does not help much. To an untrained English ear, what sounds different is not the consonants themselves but the surrounding vowels. Thus if Arabic had the words *ṣam* and *sam, qat* and *kat,* they would sound to an English ear like ‘some’ and ‘Sam’, ‘cut’ and ‘cat’. Note that *q* requires no following *u*, so that if there is one (as in *qur’ān),* it marks a full vowel.

‘,’,*ḥ*

The first is the glottal stop. Standard English speakers do not notice it in their own speech, but are acutely aware of it in the dialects of others (as when a Cockney pronounces ‘bottle’ as ‘bol’, or a Glaswegian says ‘hwe’ abü‘i’?’ for ‘What about it?’). It is silent in the definite article *al-* when this takes the form ‘l- (as in *aṣḥābi ‘l-fīl*). The pair and *ḥ* are easy to relate to each other (the first is a voiced version of the second), but impossible to relate to anything in the phonetics of English; if it helps, they are pharyngeal fricatives. Don’t

be misled by ṣḥ; it represents a *ṣ* followed by a *ḥ* (compare English ‘mishap’).

Doubled consonants

These really are doubled: the *tt* in *kuttāb* (‘those who write’) sounds like the ‘t-t’ in the English ‘hat-trick’.

Stress

If the last syllable consists of consonant + long vowel + consonant (or consonant + short vowel + two consonants), stress it – as with the last word of each verse of Sūra 105 *(taḍlīl,* etc.). If not, put the stress on the last such syllable in the word: the second syllable of *hijāratin,* the first of *māliki* (and *rabbuka).* If the word does not contain such a syllable, stress the first syllable by default – as with the last word of each verse of Sūra 112 *(aḥad,* etc.).

Going further

The Koran in translation

By now there are numerous translations of the Koran available in English. The renderings of Koranic passages given in this book are based on the translation of A. J. Arberry, though I have freely modified it when it seemed appropriate to do so (The *Koran interpreted,* London 1964; note that the system of verse-numbering used by Arberry differs from that of the Egyptian Koran, which I have used in this book). Another translation which is often used is that of Abdallah Yusuf Ali, which comes with an Arabic text and a commentary (The *Holy Qur-an: text, translation & commentary,* Lahore 1938; a revised version published in the United States in 1991 is entitled *The meaning of the Holy Qur'ān).* One thing these two translators had in common was that each found solace in translating the Koran at a time of acute personal distress. They differ in that Yusuf Ali, unlike Arberry, wanted 'to make English itself an Islamic language', an ambition that seemed more extravagant then than it does now.

The Koran itself

As we have seen, the Koran is – among other things – an icon. There are two things you can do to get a sense of this without knowing a word of Arabic. The first is to go to see the icon. Large museums often possess fine manuscript Korans or old fragments; for example, you may well find the Moroccan Koran of 1568 (shown in Fig. 11) on exhibition at the British Museum. The second thing you can do is to listen to the recitation of the Koran. It is usually possible to buy inexpensive cassettes wherever substantial Muslim communities live (Muslim bookshops often stock them); and these days you can listen to recordings and purchase them on the Internet. Better still, hear the Koran recited live if you have the opportunity – but if you are not a Muslim, don't assume you are welcome without asking.

If you do know some Arabic, you need a real Koran, preferably a good printing of the standard Egyptian text. You will, of course, have to touch it. If you are not a Muslim, my advice is that you go by the opinion of Dāwūd ibn 'AIī (d. 884), the founding figure of the Ẓāhirī school of law; he has no objection to your handling a Koran. You may find it helpful to use the Azhar-authorized facing-page translation mentioned in Chapter 8 (M. M. Khatib, *The Bounteous Koran: a translation of meaning and commentary,* London 1984). If you know no Arabic, but are sufficiently interested to learn some, take a course. Alternatively, you may be the kind of person who can learn grammar and basic vocabulary from books. In this case, I recommend D. Cowan, *An introduction to modern literary Arabic,* Cambridge 1958. Your first dictionary should be H. Wehr, *A*

dictionary of modern written Arabic, ed. J. Milton Cowan, Wiesbaden 1979.

Books about the Koran

There is a vast amount written about the Koran in English. A helpful, though by now somewhat dated, synopsis of the field is *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān,* revised by W. M. Watt, Edinburgh 1970. A recent work is N. Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an,* London 1996. Although the book is really a piece of research (mainly concerned with the question of how far it is possible to discern large-scale structure in the Koran), it is accessibly written, and represents an interesting confluence of contemporary German and Muslim scholarship. A short survey of what the Koran has to say about some of the things that are important to it can be found in Chapters 3–6 of my *Muhammad* (in the Oxford University Press 'Past Masters' series, Oxford 1983). If you are interested in reading more about the recitation of the Koran, go to my main source on the subject: K. Nelson, *The art of reciting the Qur'an,* Austin, Texas 1985 (based on her field-work in Cairo in 1977-8).

In this book I have said almost nothing about Muslims living in Western countries. Their situation is, of course, untypical of that of Muslims at large, but to the extent that they express themselves in Western languages – of which many are now native users – their thought is readily accessible to the Western reader. An example of a work by a modern-minded Muslim who spent much of his career in

the United States and wrote in English is Fazlur Rahman, *Major themes of the Qur'ān,* Minneapolis 1980. Like a good deal that Muslims publish in the West (including the works of Mohammed Arkoun, who writes in French), this is not the kind of book that the Azhar could be expected to approve.

All this assumes that you want to read about the Koran in English. If you read French or German, you might try consulting Robinson's bibliography for leads. The volume of writing on the Koran in Arabic and other Islamic languages is, of course, immense (one significant modern scholarly work in Arabic is mentioned below).

Many of the books noted above have been reprinted once or more.

My sources

Islamicists will have a fair idea of the provenance of most of the material used in this book. Anyone who needs a reference for some nugget or other is welcome to contact me. I have derived particular benefit from Hind Shalabī's monograph on the Koranic text in medieval Tunisia (al-*Qirā'āt bi-lfrīqiyya min al-fatḥ ilā muntaṣaf al-qarn al-khāmis al-hijrī,* Tunis 1983), and from an unpublished paper of M. J. Kister entitled *'Lā yamassuhu illā l-muṭahharūna'*.

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